# A Phenomenological Study of Principals' Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

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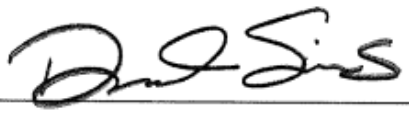
Signature 

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ABSTRACT

One of the biggest problems facing American educators is the challenge to increase student achievement in the era of accountability and high stakes testing (DuFour et al., 2016). Student test scores and achievement remain stagnant across south Georgia (GADOE, 2018a; GADOE, 2019b). One reform used by schools to help increase student achievement is the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs help increase the efficacy of teachers, which is the most crucial factor contributing to an increase in student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016; Goddard et al., 2004; Hattie, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the professional practice of PLCs by examining the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle schools principals in rural south Georgia in regards to student achievement. The narrative of participant experiences and perceptions created a potential roadmap for other middle school leaders to implement PLCs. Participants for this study were identified from rural south Georgia middle schools using maximum variation purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The researcher collected participant data using a series of interviews, observations, and document analysis (Seidman, 2013). At the end of data analysis and coding, four major themes emerged from this study: PLC Processes, Capacity within Schools, School Culture, and Student Achievement. After analyzing participant data, I concluded schools that employ PLCs as a professional practice for teachers experience professional growth in teachers and academic growth in students. The study's participants, regardless of the PLC framework used in their school, all had positive experiences and perceptions of PLCs and their resulting impact on students, teachers, and capacity within school.

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# DEDICATION

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."
– Nelson Mandela

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Landon and Addyson. There is nothing I love more in this world than being your dad. Never let anyone tell you what you can and cannot do. Be brave and take chances!

"Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly."
- Robert F. Kennedy

# Chapter I

## Overview

The inspiration for this study is my fervent desire to increase student achievement through the professional practice embedded in professional learning communities (PLCs). My understanding of and involvement with PLCs was limited until I accepted an administrative position in a county with full PLC implementation. As a result, I quickly learned the dynamics, purposes, and operational functions of PLCs. I realized PLCs are a process that can genuinely make students, teachers, and schools better. I discovered I had a passion for the work completed by PLCs and a desire to immerse myself in as much knowledge of PLCs as I could find. I have read numerous books and articles and attended multiple professional learning opportunities regarding PLCs. In July 2018, I attended a professional development session on PLCs that changed my entire perspective on how schools should operate and my career trajectory.

The PLC professional learning opportunities and readings marked the onset of the driving passion behind my doctoral program of study, dissertation, and professional work. Before beginning the Valdosta State University doctoral class program, I believed my dissertation would concern PLCs and how they can reform schools to put students and teachers first. These two groups of people are interconnected and are the keys to improving schools and student achievement. In education today, there is a significant emphasis placed on student outcomes measured by high stakes testing (DuFour et al.,

2016; ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002). In this study, I will examine PLCs in relation to high stakes testing, outcome reforms, and student achievement.

My motivation for this study was derived from what PLC participation afforded me and conversations with teachers and staff who work in my building. We have a diverse staff, with both veteran teachers and novice teachers. The veteran teachers shared that they have experienced a series of changes with school reform and instructional practices. They asserted the value of their PLC time and believe their work within PLCs truly helps enable them to be better teachers. The newer teachers stated they value the collaborative nature PLCs provide and appreciate not facing first-year teaching challenges alone. They recognize their work in PLCs makes them better teachers and affords them opportunities to increase student achievement through improved professional practice.

## Statement of Problem

One of the biggest problems facing American educators is the challenge to increase student achievement in the era of accountability. Schools need to find ways to increase student achievement as measured by high stakes testing (DuFour et al., 2016). Student test scores and achievement remain stagnant across south Georgia. In Georgia, the instrument for measuring school success is CCRPI or College and Career Ready Performance Index (GADOE, 2018b). CCRPI processes and reports on student achievement, subgroup achievement, school climate, and school, district, and state success (GADOE, 2018b). CCRPI reports for 2019 and 2018 indicated south Georgia was underperforming as a whole (GADOE, 2019b; GADOE, 2018a). The Georgia Department of Education's (GADOE) 2018 CCRPI Report listed the state average for

middle schools as 76.2 out of 100, and the 2019 GADOE CCRPI Report listed the state average as 77.0 out of 100. I examined multiple Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESA) located in south Georgia. When examining the middle school CCRPI scores for the districts within those RESA districts, data indicated 29 out of the 36 fell below the state CCRPI 2018 average (GADOE, 2018a), and 27 of 36 fell below the state's 2019 CCRPI average (GADOE, 2019b). The average middle school CCRPI score for those districts in 2018 was 68.99, which is 7.21 points below the state average. The 2019 average was 71.42, which is 5.58 points below the state average. The state legislature changed CCRPI indicators, so CCRPI data from years before 2018 cannot be compared (GADOE, 2019b; Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2019). Middle schools in this geographic region must respond to this data, taking necessary measures to improve student achievement. The current trend of high stakes testing is persisting due to requirements cited in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the current education law in the United States. Without addressing the issue, schools in this region of the state may continue to fall below the state average. One way to accomplish increased student achievement on these measures may be to enhance teacher effectiveness (Hattie, 2017).

Researchers found collective teacher efficacy, also referred to as teacher effectiveness, is the most crucial factor contributing to student achievement (Hattie, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Collective teacher efficacy is the extent to which teachers believe they can improve students' lives (Hattie, 2017). One of the significant reforms used by myriad schools and districts to improve student achievement through improved professional practices is the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are a recurrent process in which teachers regularly

collaborate to determine what strategies were successful and what strategies failed, based on student data (DuFour et al., 2016). PLCs are not a program, but are a framework employed to increase teacher effectiveness through collaboration. In PLCs, teachers use their collaboration time to plan essential curriculum and common assessments and perform data analysis (DuFour et al., 2016). The PLC work teachers perform creates job-embedded training to better their professional practices (Goddard et al., 2004). Job-embedded training allows teachers to work together to improve student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004). The focus of PLCs is on learning rather than on teaching (McBrayer et al., 2018). When PLCs are effective, they increase teacher efficacy. This improved effectiveness provides teachers the needed tools to improve student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016).

Schools becoming learning organizations enable educators to meet the expectations placed upon them in an era of increasing demands on teachers (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Organizations need to develop a culture committed to learning (Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) described learning organizations as people working together to create the reality they want. In an interview, Senge later defined learning organizations as "those in which people at all levels are, collectively, continually enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create" (O'Neil, 1995, p. 20). PLCs offer teachers the ability to create a culture of trust that enables the practice of life-long learning (Antinluoma et al., 2018). Hattie (2017) suggested understanding how to increase collective teacher efficacy can lead to higher student achievement. If educators accept the research on teacher efficacy as the highest factor concerning student achievement, then professional development, also known as professional learning, should be prioritized. To

increase collective teacher efficacy, individual teacher efficacy needs to be increased (Hattie & Anderman, 2013). Self-efficacy refers to one's personal belief in themself to accomplish the courses of action necessary to achieve a sought-after conclusion (Bandura, 1997; Hattie & Anderman, 2013). Teacher efficacy and student achievement are reciprocal partners (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). If achievement rises, teachers' self-image improves. When a teacher's efficacy increases, collective teacher efficacy increases. Each member becomes more knowledgeable because of the group, and a school-wide culture of learning ensues. To improve students' achievement across an entire school, educators must enhance their collective efficacy by improving both individuals and groups (DuFour et al., 2016; Hattie & Anderman, 2013).

## Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the professional practice of PLCs through an examination of the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly participate in and promote PLCs in their schools. According to DuFour et al. (2016), PLCs are the optimal way to improve student achievement through continual progress in the teacher's professional practice. Schools' must have the ability to operate effective PLCs and to improve student achievement in order to become a Learning Organization (Senge et al., 2012). Organizations cannot reach peak outcomes unless individuals commit to continued learning through practice (Senge, 1990).

## Significance

Student achievement, teacher evaluation systems, and school evaluation scores are directly connected to high stakes testing. Georgia uses the Georgia Milestones

Assessment System (GMAS) to measure student achievement. Despite the importance of these scores, many schools still struggle to improve student test scores and to perform at higher levels on high stakes tests. This struggle is significant because student achievement is a part of teachers' and schools' evaluation systems. Teachers are rated, in part, by student achievement data from GMAS on the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES). Student achievement data are also part of the CCRPI (College and Career Ready Performance Index) school ratings. Student achievement contributes 30% to the teachers' TKES evaluation rating and compromises most of a school's CCRPI rating (GADOE, 2018b). One study's findings indicated student achievement and teacher efficacy maintain a significant positive relationship (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). If teacher effectiveness increases, student achievement can also increase (Hattie, 2017). If student achievement increases, GMAS scores can go up, teacher evaluation ratings can increase, and school CCRPI scores can improve (GADOE, 2018b).

This researcher's findings may be significant for other schools and administrators across the region with similar socioeconomic factors and demographics. PLCs can create sustained school improvement, which correlates with student achievement (DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour et al., 2016). There is ample research regarding PLCs, but none specifically address principal perceptions in the state's geographic region. This research may be significant, given CCRPI data for middle schools in this region of the state (GADOE, 2019b; GADOE, 2018a). Researchers have argued principal perceptions of PLCs need further study to better understand the perceived importance of PLCs and necessary actions steps to be effective PLCs (Cranston, 2009; Stamper, 2015). Findings from this study may help educators better understand principals' viewpoints regarding the

successes achieved through the professional practice of PLCs. As schools continue to work towards improved student achievement and struggle to perform well on GADOE's CCRPI, this study may be helpful to school leaders seeking to implement the PLC process to improve teachers' effectiveness to increase student achievement. Toole and Louis (2002) contended, "If educational systems hope to be transformative, they will ultimately have to rely on teachers' acquiring the skills and knowledge of transformation. It is possible, therefore, to argue professional learning communities are becoming potentially more important…" (p. 256). The most successful PLCs are both encouraged and emphasized by principals, and without those traits, productivity is unlikely (Toole & Louis, 2002).

There is not a uniform model for PLCs. In this study, the researcher examined the framework established by Richard DuFour (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016); however, his PLC framework is not the only one used today. Hord and Sommers (2008) espoused many of the same features but differed in a more disciplined structure. Another framework is Critical Friends Groups. In this framework, teachers work together to increase student achievement through collegial conversations (Curry, 2008). Caroline Murphy developed another framework similar to PLCs, known as Whole-Faculty Study groups. Staff members work in study groups to examine data and collaborate on strategies to perform at higher levels (Thigpen, 2011). This researcher focused on different perspectives, contexts, and implementation practices by studying multiple participants at different identified schools. The findings of this study may illuminate differences within the group of identified principals and schools concerning PLCs to better understand the extent to which these differences affect the perceptions the

identified principals have on PLCs and their impact on student achievement. The findings from this study may also improve PLCs within the identified principals' schools, reformate PLCs' framework to be more effective, and help identify weaknesses in PLCs.

## Research Questions

The following qualitative research questions grounded this study as the researcher sought to better understand south Georgia middle school principals' experiences and perceptions regarding PLCs. The researcher explored the different structures within the region and examined various frameworks.

***Question 1***. What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?

***Question 2***. What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?

***Question 3***. What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?

## Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) defined a conceptual framework as "an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous" (p. 5). The conceptual framework I utilized for this study was a cross-section of concepts that have informed and guided my research. This framework provided the construct to interpret the findings from this study. Roberts

(2010) contended a conceptual framework is "a lens through which your research problem is viewed" (p. 129). The lens my conceptual framework provided was the context for successful PLCs.

Furthermore, "…a conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in a narrative form, the main things to be studied- the key factors, constructs, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them" (Roberts, 2010, p. 129). The conceptual framework for this study took a considerable amount of time to develop because of its significance. Maxwell (2013) stated:

> the most important thing to understand about your conceptual framework is that it is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why a tentative theory of the phenomena that you are investigating. (p. 39)

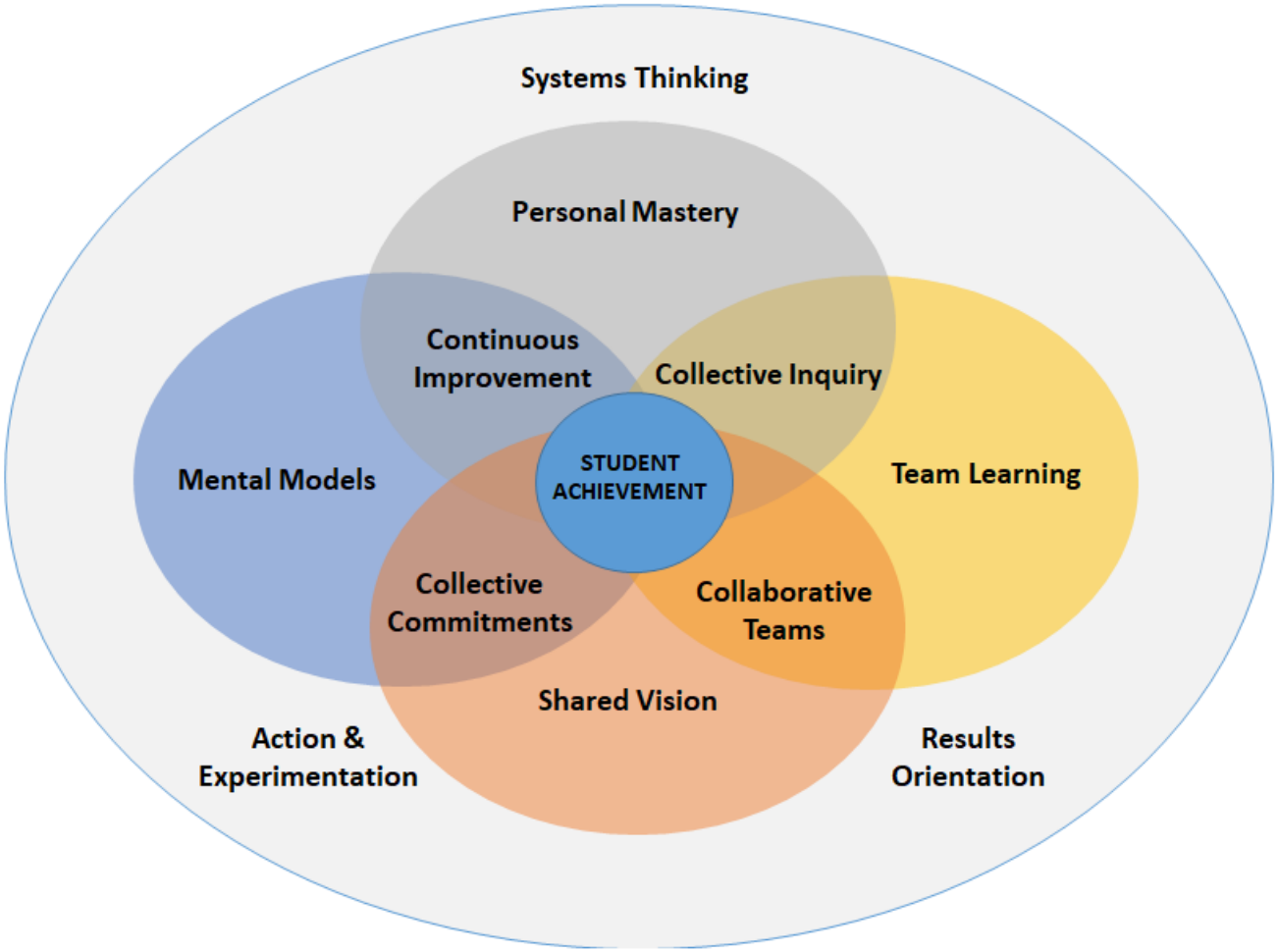
I begin by discussing my experiential knowledge, which is the researcher's background or what they bring to the study (Maxwell, 2013). I also considered prior theory and research in constructing the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework for this study was a combination of two existing concepts and my experiential knowledge. The conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1. – See Appendix A) is a Venn diagram depicting the main components of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLCs. As shown in Figure 1, the illustration of the concept uses Senge's five disciplines as the larger circles for the diagram because they lay the foundation for learning organizations. These disciplines are personal mastery, team learning, shared vision, mental models, and systems thinking (Senge, 1990). The five disciplines of learning organizations create

similar characteristics to DuFour and Eaker's seven characteristics of PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

**Figure 1**

***Professional Learning Community Concept Map***




*Note*. This concept map illustrates how the various components of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour's (DuFour et al., 2016) PLCs interact and create an intersection at student achievement.

Together, these two concepts have overlapping components. They both start with the concept of shared vision. Both Senge (1990) and DuFour et al. (2016) used shared

vision to describe a crucial part of their concepts. Senge's disciplines of personal mastery and mental models form the characteristics of DuFour et al.'s continuous improvement. The mental models and shared vision components of Senge overlap to encapsulate DuFour et al.'s collective commitments component. Senge's descriptions of shared vision and team learning, together, describe the definition of DuFour et al.'s collaborative teams. Team learning and personal mastery (Senge, 1990) connect to form DuFour et al.'s collective inquiry. Senge's systems thinking and DuFour et al.'s results orientation, action orientation, and experimentation connect all other parts. Together, these pieces represent the connectedness and synergy of all the other represented components from Senge and DuFour et al.

### *My Experiential Knowledge*

My passion for understanding PLCs is derived from my own experiences in K-12 education and my belief in the benefit of PLCs to help school stakeholders. My experiences with PLCs before 2018 were limited and somewhat ineffective. The school systems where I had worked treated PLC meetings like department meetings or committee meetings. There were no clear agenda items with learning outcomes being discussed or compared. Teachers did not have challenging conversations that caused people to reflect on their professional practice. Often, meetings turned into complaint sessions about other teachers, students, or administrators. I experienced these sessions as both a teacher and an assistant principal. This changed in the summer of 2018 when I accepted a job in a new school system in which PLCs are prominent. Over the next two years, I attended numerous training and professional development opportunities, read many books, and led PLC training. I began to value the ideas and concepts behind PLCs

but still did not truly understand the complexity of implementation nor the importance of fidelity by all teachers and staff.

When I became a building principal, I became the instructional, cultural, and operational leader. I was challenged to dive further into the PLC process and work with teachers daily within the district PLCs' constructs. I facilitated and engaged in PLC meetings focused on student achievement and teacher improvement. I also participated in meetings where the focus was not on student achievement or teacher improvement. I decided to increase my understanding of PLCs to assist my teachers' continual improvement and provide better opportunities for my students. For the last two years, I have worked diligently to immerse myself in every PLC-related happening in my building. Our teachers and students have made great strides. My conversations with teachers have given me feedback indicating they appreciate the support, togetherness, and feedback. However, the framework used to run PLCs in my district is not the only framework. Other frameworks are similar but with different components.

It was easy for me to go directly to teachers and speak with them about their education, backgrounds, PLC-related experiences, and PLC perceptions because they are available daily because I am the building principal. However, through my experiences and studies, I realized not all PLCs are equally effective, and student achievement measured through high stakes testing is of utmost importance. Educators must look beyond the teachers in their buildings and counties and broaden the horizons we explore to find the best instructional practices available. Principals have the power to implement the framework and PLC-related processes within their buildings to increase student achievement. Principals can also empower teachers to take ownership, leadership, and

collective responsibility for professional practices to improve student achievement. My experiences and these conclusions led me to this proposed study because of my desire to explore experiences in PLCs through principals' perceptions to examine the differences and similarities in PLCs.

## *Existing Theory and Research*

### **Learning Organizations.**

The concept of Learning Organizations was developed by Peter Senge (1990) and presented in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge contended organizations should cease to believe everything is isolated and unconnected. Senge contended:

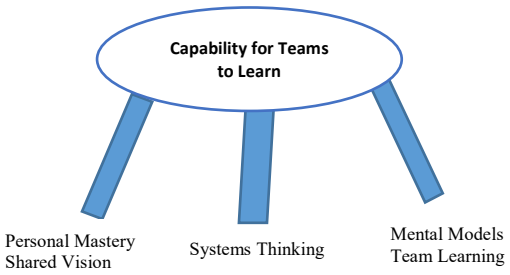
> …when we give up this illusion- we can build learning organizations, organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p. 3)

Organizational learning focuses on two main components. First, there must be a system of organizational structures that facilitate shared and collaborative decision-making processes (Senge, 1990). It is essential to share the data among all individuals (Fauske & Raybould, 2005). Participants then analyze, compare, and examine data critically. All organization members must have the ability to work together to better the whole (Fauske & Raybould, 2005). This social interaction was the second component of organizational learning; how individuals work together, see each other, share the same vision, and create synergy (Senge, 1990).

Senge (1990) contended there are five components to learning organizations: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Senge (1990) uses an illustration of a three-legged stool to bring the concepts together, as shown in Figure 2 (See Appendix B). Personal mastery is the first element because organizations rely on individuals and only improve when they learn (Senge et al., 2012). Personal mastery is the ability of someone to push themselves to increase their ability level and create wanted results (Senge, 1990). The second discipline is mental models. Mental models are "images, assumptions, and stores… that help determine how we make sense of the world and take action" (Senge, 1990, p. 164). The third discipline is shared vision, meaning that a staff member develops a picture of what they aspire to be (Senge et al., 2012). Team learning is the next discipline and is defined as "when a group of people functions as a whole" (Senge, p. 217). Senge espoused that organizations can create a framework for learning with ownership shared by all. The last of the five disciplines is Systems Thinking. Systems thinking is what brings all the disciplines together. Senge et al., (2012) said, "the fifth discipline, it is the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice" (p. 12).

**Figure 2**

Three-Legged Stool




Note. Three-Legged-Stool illustrating connections between all the disciplines. Adapted from "Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and

Everyone Who Cares About Education by Peter Senge, 2012, p. 74, Copyright 2012 by Crown Business.

**Professional Learning Communities.**

DuFour et al. (2016) defined PLCs as a process in which educators collaborate in habitual sequences to investigate, analyze, and perform action research to better serve their students. Educators work collaboratively during mutual planning phases to share and advance their practices, plan student curricula, produce common assessments, and use data to drive educational decisions. Through PLCs, teachers can work in a culture of trust conducive to ongoing feedback needed to improve their capability as professional educators (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Owen, 2016). Fullan (2006) found PLCs bring school communities together, leading to improved learning and achievement. Melvin (2011) claimed collaborative teacher teams and the creation of communities within schools were at the heart of PLCs. In collaborative teams, teachers are stronger together than when working separately as individuals (Melvin, 2011). Togetherness improves learning for teachers and students alike (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Antinluoma et al., 2018; Chauraya & Brodie, 2018; Fullan, 2006; Tallman, 2019; Wilson, 2016).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) claimed schools should become PLCs. They defined PLCs' characteristics as shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation. According to DuFour et al. (2016), teachers must work together instead of seclusion. They further asserted that the primary purpose of the PLC framework is to instill a belief within teachers and the school community that all students

can learn. DuFour et al. described a method of regular collaboration with open dialogue and feedback. They said teachers must use this time and feedback provided by colleagues to examine practices, brainstorm new ideas, and increase professional capacity to increase student achievement. Reeves (2010) believed the best professional learning opportunities focus on students and not teachers, define the context for success, and focus on people rather than programs.

## Summary of Methodology

The researcher utilized a qualitative method to examine principal perceptions of PLCs in this study. Qualitative methods offer researchers the ability to explore meaning (Crewswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). In this study, the researcher employed a phenomenological inquiry to respond to three research questions. In a phenomenological study, the researcher aims to better understand and make meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). The researcher interviewed six middle school principals using Seidman's three-interview approach (2013). Principals were selected from middle schools within south Georgia. In this phenomenological study, the researcher used various methods to collect and analyze qualitative data. Data collection methods included interviews, observations, and documents. Maxwell (2013) stated, "the purpose for using multiple methods is to gain information about the different aspects of the phenomena" (p. 102). This researcher utilized memos, open coding, and axial coding for data analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim upon completion, and the researcher crafted memos to write and record the first thoughts (Maxwell, 2013). I employed In vivo coding as the open coding method. In vivo coding elucidates the participant's original words (Saldana, 2016). The

final type of coding was axial coding. Saldana (2016) said, "axial coding extends the analytic work from initial coding… and aims to link categories with subcategories and asks how they are related" (p. 244). More details of the methodology used in this study are discussed in Chapter III.

## Limitations

Limitations are possible weaknesses in research studies (Patton, 2015). The study employed a small sample size because the researcher's goal was to interview participants with rich information and knowledge of PLCs in their buildings (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). My study relied on the experiences and perceptions of participants. Each participant had a unique background, education level, life experience, and work experience. These experiences affected their knowledge and understanding of PLCs. Each participant was from a different school and county, and because they employed different PLC frameworks, their experiences were different. The study was limited to south Georgia participants, so it may not be possible to generalize to other areas.

Coronavirus disease (COVID19) also created certain limitations for this study. During the completion of this study, the United States was in the middle of a global pandemic. The pandemic created limitations regarding admittance to sites and access to participants. The study's design had to change based on the limited availability of in-person interviews and observations. While interviews happened virtually, observations did not.

The researcher relied heavily on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and stories for this study. The researcher used interviews, observations, and documents to better understand and make meaning of these experiences, perceptions, and stories. This

type of study relies heavily on the researcher. The ability to collect rich data from interviews depended on the researcher's ability to ask meaningful questions and the interviewee's ability to provide rich information. The interviewee needed a willingness to be open and honest and not attempt to satisfy the researcher. While conducting the study, I monitored for researcher bias and reactivity. Bias is when a researcher changes the study because of their own opinions (Maxwell, 2013). Reactivity refers to participants reacting differently because of the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

## Summary of Chapter

In this research study, the researcher examined the professional practice of PLCs by examining principals' lived experiences and perceptions. PLCs are one of many educational reforms implemented in schools across America to improve student achievement, teacher practices, and school culture. DuFour et al.'s (2016) framework for PLCs was based on Senge's (1990) learning organization theory. PLCs come in various styles and frameworks, so integrating the concepts of Learning Organizations and the DuFour et al. model of PLCs was appropriate. These two concepts highlight the importance of individual and team learning through collaborative practices. Principals can provide a unique and valuable perspective in illuminating PLC practices within their schools. The findings from this study may inform other educators from similar areas and be adapted to schools throughout the state and beyond. The following are definitions of terms followed by a section in which I analyze the existing literature related to this study.

## Definitions of Terms

The following terms used in this study are defined to help the reader.

*Action Orientation and Experimentation*. When teachers on PLC teams work collaboratively to increase their learning and through action experimentation. DuFour et al., (2016) call this learning by doing.

*Collaborative Teams*. When teachers work together and interdependently to examine and influence their expert practice to advance individual and group results (DuFour et al., 2016)

*Collective Inquiry*. When teacher teams continuously question individual and group practices to seek new teaching methods to increase student learning (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Collective Teacher Efficacy*. When teachers believe in the group's ability to increase student achievement (Hattie, 2017).

*College and Career Ready Performance Index*. The state of Georgia uses this rating system to hold schools and teachers accountable for school improvement and student achievement (GADOE, 2018b).

*Continuous Improvement*. The continual commitment used by teacher teams to question their professional practices to increase professional capacity to help meet students' needs and the school's mission, vision, values, and goals (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. The education law signed by President Obama in 2015 that replaced NCLB (ESSA, 2015).

*Georgia Milestones*. The summative assessment program created by the Georgia Department of Education to consistently measure K-12 students' achievement, progress, and preparedness (GADOE, 2018b).

*High stakes Testing*. State-mandated end-of-course, end-of-grade assessments, or standardized tests to measure student achievement and mastery (Amrein & Berliner, 2003b).

*Learning Organizations*. When individuals in organizations work together to continually produce desired outcomes (Senge, 1990).

*Mental Models*. The underlying thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, and preconceived notions people hold (Senge, 1990).

*No Child Left Behind*. The education law signed in 2002 by President George W. Bush that ushered in the era of accountability in schools (NCLB, 2002).

*Personal Mastery*. Individuals' unwavering commitment to become the person they want to become (Senge, 1990).

*Professional Learning Community (PLCs)*. A collaborative team of educators focused on improving student achievement through enhanced professional practice (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

*Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA)*. Educational agencies across the state of Georgia that provide school districts and leaders with assistance and training. There are 16 total RESAs in Georgia committed to school improvement.

*Results Orientation*. When PLC teams assess their work and strategies as individuals and as groups based on student data. In results orientation, data analysis drives all instructional decisions and helps PLC teams decide if the content has been mastered or needs to be retaught (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

*Rural School*: A school that is located at least 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

*Shared Goals*. In PLCs, shared goals indicate how educators will track their progress towards their shared mission and shared vision (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Shared Mission*. In PLCs, shared mission is why the organization exists (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Shared Values*. In PLCs, shared values are the expectations and behaviors needed to achieve the shared mission and shared vision. (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Shared Vision*. In PLCs, shared vision is what the school must become to achieve the shared mission (DuFour et al., 2016).

*Systems Thinking*. The ability to see the connections throughout a system or organization. Senge (1990) refers to the interactions and connectedness of personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, and team learning.

*Team Learning*. When members of a teamwork together through discussion and dialogue to learn as a team and overcome obstacles and challenges (Senge, 1990).

# Chapter II

## Literature Review

One of a school principal's main tasks is to raise student achievement as measured by standardized tests (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). Student achievement is the quintessential reason educators do what they do; simply put, teachers teach to help students achieve. One professional practice many principals use to improve student achievement is PLCs. My desire for conducting this study came from witnessing students' and teachers' daily struggles due to low student achievement scores. I aimed to examine PLCs using qualitative research methods in order to explore the experiences and perceptions of middle school principals' who currently promote PLCs in their schools and who reside in south Georgia. South Georgia middle schools are currently struggling to meet or exceed the state College and Career Readiness Performance Indicator (CCRPI) average (GADOE, 2019b; GADOE, 2018a). My goal was to present findings that illustrate strategies that may increase student achievement by improving teacher effectiveness through the professional practice of PLCs. I utilized the following three research questions to guide my study:

> ***Question 1***. What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?
>
> ***Question 2***. What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?

***Question 3***. What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?

In this chapter, I present a review of selected literature based on the problem and purpose outlined in this chapter. Student achievement is the main focus of the literature review. Researchers indicated a need to continue studying the impact of PLCs on student achievement (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Burde, 2016; Burns et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2018; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020; Ratts, 2015). In this chapter, I review the practice and history of high stakes testing and student achievement to establish a foundation for this review. I also highlight two authors who heavily inspired my research, Peter Senge and Richard DuFour. Senge (1990) is a seminal researcher in the field of organizational learning. He outlined the five organizational learning components: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. Organizational learning is necessary for all individuals to learn, and only when individuals learn can organizations learn (Senge, 1990).

PLCs emerged from the constructs of organizational learning. DuFour is a leading author and researcher for modern-day PLCs. Central characteristics of an effective PLC are shared vision, mission, values, and goals; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentations; continuous improvement; and results orientation (DuFour et al., 2016). I examine the intersection of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour et al.'s (2016) PLC concepts in the literature review.

Principals are the leaders of their buildings and thus have the authority to enact change. The role of principals in PLCs are examined in this literature review. The organization for the literature review is:

1. A History of High stakes Testing and Student Achievement
2. Senge's (1990) Learning Organizations
3. DuFour et al.'s (2016) Professional Learning Communities
4. Role of the Principals in PLCs
5. Summary

## A History of High stakes Testing and Student Achievement

### *A Nation at Risk*

Students in the 21st century participate in high stakes testing, which has several implications for the student, the student's teachers, and the school. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (United States, 1983), reformers, educators, and legislators began to tie standardized tests to nearly all educational decisions. The commission's chief concern was America's educational system was failing (United States, 1983). The commission found America's educational system had been "eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (1983, p. 9) and the future of America was at stake. The commission reported various reasons for this decline, including content, expectations, time, and teaching (United States, 1983). The commission (1983) used a comparative model to examine America's education system to other countries worldwide. The recommended reform was to "dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all—old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority" (United States, 1983, p. 10). Since this report was released, there has been a renewed focus on accountability, which

has led to the rise of high stakes testing and has prominently positioned standardized tests as a critical part of American educational culture (Giordano, 2005).

Leaders in the United States Department of Education attempted to remove the achievement gap through more testing (Croft et al., 2015; ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002; Wagner, 2008). While standardized tests are not new (Cordogan, 2015; Giordano, 2005), the way school systems and other stakeholders have used the information garnered from those tests has changed over time. Cordogan (2015) explained how the use of high stakes standardized testing continued to change, stating, "we are entering a new world of testing" (p. 36). No longer are the results from these tests used to measure students' achievement, but also the achievement of schools and teachers (Cordogan, 2015). The high stakes testing environment educators and students experience today is a direct result of three major educational reforms: No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

### *No Child Left Behind*

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002 (NCLB, 2002). NCLB was an attempt by the Bush administration to help close achievement gaps and stimulate students' ability to attain equality. Central to NCLB was the mandate to improve student achievement and teacher quality on a national level (NLCB, 2002). To this end, NCLB was the beginning of high stakes testing implemented in the United States to measure student achievement progress (Nichols et al., 2005). The law mandated all states had to implement assessment and accountability systems. According to Nichols et al. (2005), "at the core of these mandates is that states adopt a system of accountability defined by sanctions and rewards

that would be applied to schools, teachers, and students" (p. 5). The accountability piece for schools under NCLB (2002) was Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools not meeting AYP are on a list and required to implement interventions to drive improvement.

Schools must ensure all of their students reach pre-determined achievement outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016). Leaders began to focus on students' overall achievement level, and in addition, began to focus on subgroups (Nichols et al., 2005). Standardized tests measure student achievement, and schools, teachers, and students either achieve pre-determined benchmarks or fail and receive sanctions. Thomas (2005) argued the implementation of high stakes testing follows a "one-size-fits-all fallacy" (p. 263). Since the NCLB enactment, studies have indicated NCLB failed to improve student achievement (Wagner, 2008). No two students are identical, so the greatest obstacle to overcome for schools was how to match instruction to every student's learning needs (Thomas, 2005). Thomas (2005) labeled students who failed to meet the pre-determined achievement goals as the collateral damage of high stakes testing. In the eyes of NCLB, these children were failures. In fact, the real failure was NCLB did not recognize the unique learning styles of individuals (Thomas, 2005).

Muhammad (2009) stated, "since the implementation of NCLB, we have seen no significant progress in closing achievement gaps in student performance and have made no real steps in realizing the fair and equitable system the legislation aims to accomplish" (p. 9). Croft et al. (2015) further contended NCLB not only did not work, but also, it "expanded inequities and exacerbated a discourse of failure regarding teachers, public schools, and teacher preparation programs" (p. 70). NCLB created a loss in both American public confidence and trust in teachers (Croft et al., 2015). Duffy et al. (2008)

suggested because of NCLB, "one assumes, without much evidence, that increasing demands and expectations for students will result in or cause increased student and teacher performance" (p. 10). Beyond time, standardized tests also cost a great deal of money. According to Blazer (2011), before NCLB, $423 million was spent on states' standardized tests; the current number now sits at $1.1 billion. According to DuFour and Marzano (2011), even the NCLB's original promoters have concluded it was unsuccessful at raising student outcomes.

### *Race to the Top*

Race to the Top (RTTT) was a grant program initiated by President Obama's administration in 2009 (McGuinn, 2012). RTTT was implemented after NCLB and was an attempt by the Obama administration to fix NCLB's failings (McGuinn, 2012). At the time, President Obama said, "it is time to stop just talking about education reform and start actually doing it. It is time to make education America's national mission" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2). RTTT was a $4.35 billion competitive grant program that had states competing against each other (McGuinn, 2010). States were assisted by the U.S. Department of Education in writing their applications and the policies, procedures, and awarded criteria (Howell, 2015). RTTT required states to implement reforms in four categories: standards and assessments, data systems to measure growth, teacher retention and rewards, and turnaround schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). As a result, many states implemented significant policy changes and reforms to win grant monies (McGuinn, 2010).

RTTT was different from other educational policies because of its transparent, competitive nature (Petrova, 2018). In Phase I of RTTT, 40 states and Washington D.C.

submitted applications, and in Phase II, 35 states and Washington D.C. competed (Howell, 2015). In Georgia, RTTT resulted in the Teacher and Leader Keys Evaluation System (TKES/LKES), Teacher Assessment of Performance (TAPS), and Common Core standards (Croft et al., 2015). Race to the Top (RTTT) has had a lasting impact on state education departments throughout the United States. Many states implemented policies indicated in their applications before even submitting applications (Petrova, 2018). RTTT was "intended to help states that were experiencing financial stress not only to meet the AYP requirements of NCLB but also ease further financial stress caused by the recession of 2008" (Early, 2016).

RTTT enabled increased flexibility, creating school environments conducive to increased student achievement (Petrova, 2018). The RTTT executive summary stated, "increasing student achievement in (at a minimum) reading/language arts and mathematics as reported by the NAEP and the assessments required by ESEA" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 6). Other provisions of RTTT pinpointed an increase in graduation rates, lowering the achievement gaps of subgroups, and creating turnaround schools (Petrova, 2018). In a 2015 report, the U.S. Department of Education reported an increase in graduation rates and enrollment in advanced placement courses. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While there have been some successes with RTT, there also have been criticisms. A report compiled by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance summarized it was inconclusive as to whether RTTT affected student outcomes (Dragoset et al., 2016). This report used data collected by interviews from all 50 states between 2012 and 2013 (Dragoset et al., 2016). The results of the report indicated multiple positive findings in state reforms but no clear relationship

between RTTT and student outcomes (Dragoset et al., 2016). Petrova (2018) conducted a study of over 3000 students across 50 states, and the results were inconclusive on the extent to which RTTT affected science achievement.

### *Every Student Succeeds Act*

NCLB was replaced on December 10, 2015, when President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The intention of ESSA was to fix the failures of NCLB (Saultz et al., 2019). ESSA "returns the responsibility for performance measurement to states and school districts" (Counsell & Wright, 2018, p. 200). According to Adler-Greene (2019), ESSA still required high stakes testing but also included other factors in measuring school performance. In an overview of ESSA, Klein (2016) found schools and students still had to take part in high stakes testing to determine the achievement of students, schools, and subgroups of students within schools. ESSA (2015) required annual measurement of student performance on high stakes tests, analysis of graduation rates, tracking and comparing student growth data, comparing subgroup performances, and labeling schools. While ESSA reduced some of the testing stressors, there was still a significant emphasis placed on high stakes testing. According to Jones (2018), ESSA still used performance goals for subgroups, state assessments, graduation rates, and student growth, all measured annually by standardized tests. However, it did not solely rely on testing. "Accountability for student success will no longer be based on 100 percent proficiency in reading and math" (Alder-Greene, 2019, p. 15). Other factors, such as students' attendance, school climate as rated through surveys, and access to advanced courses, are now part of the equation (Alder-Greene, 2019; Counsell & Wright, 2018).

Under ESSA, each state submitted plans to address the United States Department of Education's implementation and adherence. ESSA (2015) gave each state the right to determine the weight of their assessments. While states do have to weigh academics more than other factors, they have some flexibility in what they do (ESSA, 2015). The Georgia Department of Education's (GADOE) plan for ESSA (2019a) focused on the improvement of the entire student and the achievement of long-term school-wide goals by student subgroups. The GADOE plan (2019a) utilized student test scores in various ways (achievement, progress, readiness) and created a weight for school climate to assign a College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score to each school. Educational leaders in Georgia did several things to eliminate some of the burdens from NCLB. In Georgia's ESSA plan, they eliminated much of the double testing students faced, provided a pathway to accelerated coursework, and provided local education agencies with the flexibility to make local decisions through waivers (GADOE, 2019a). ESSA also gave states the freedom to determine which interventions to use for underperforming schools (Counsell & Wright, 2018). NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA were all different educational laws. However, regardless of the differences, each used high stakes testing as a means to measure student achievement.

### *High stakes Testing and Student Achievement*

The goal of leaders in implementing high stakes testing after *A Nation at Risk* and the enacting of NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA was to raise student achievement scores. However, the results are currently inconclusive (Amrein & Berliner, 2003b; Braun, 2004; Furuta et al., 2016; Katsiyannis et al., 2007; Marchant et al., 2006; Nichols et al., 2005; Smith, 2016; Wong et al., 2016). Although states have spent considerable resources and

allocated significant funding to standardized testing, there is currently little evidence to support the idea high stakes testing helps students or teachers (Berliner, 2013; Berliner, 2014; Milner, 2013; Nichols et al., 2005). Marchant et al. (2006) argued it was debatable whether student learning improved because of high stakes testing. Baines and Slutsky (2009) stated, "no correlation has been found between achievement and high stakes testing" (p. 98). There was no empirical support to claim increased testing leads to increased student achievement (Baines & Slutsky, 2009). Amrein and Berliner (2003a) claimed high stakes testing decreased student motivation. In another study, Armein and Berliner (2003b) concluded, "based on data from twenty-eight states, there is scant evidence to support the proposition high stakes tests- including high stakes high school graduation exams- increase student achievement" (p. 31). Moreover, educational leaders were concerned whether data was accurate. In an analysis of statewide achievement data from a large southern state with end-of-course assessments, Steedle and Grochowalski (2017) asserted results from high stakes tests provided inaccurate information. In addition, other schools attempted to skew information through inaccurate reporting or cheating (Rose, 2015).

High stakes testing has had substantial adverse effects on students, teachers, and administrators (Blazer, 2011). In a two-year study with 348 observations across 23 classrooms in eight different schools, Plank and Condliffe (2013) found classroom instruction was directly affected by high stakes testing. Observers noted a significant difference in instruction after Christmas compared to before Christmas, with the difference being the addition of test preparation (Plank & Condliffe, 2013). Furthermore, while testing may result in some teachers improving their practice when negative

consequences are attached, most teachers do not respond well (Duffy et al., 2008). In two separate studies, Berliner (2013, 2014) found too many factors were out of teachers' control making it difficult to hold them responsible for student achievement as measured by high stakes testing. High stakes testing often causes teachers to decrease the curriculum's breadth, limiting students' achievement; as many schools must narrow or decrease the curriculum they cover to prepare students for more high stakes examinations (Amrein & Berliner, 2003a; Milner, 2013; Wagner, 2008).

Students, teachers, and administrators alike must endure repeated testing each year. Teachers and students both lose valuable instructional time preparing for proctoring and administering high stakes tests. Instructional time lost to test preparation may be better used to meet the instructional need of students (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Morgan, 2016; Rose, 2015). Rose (2015) interviewed over 60 teachers and 25 administrators from 30 different schools. The results from his research indicated subjects other than math and reading were minimized to increase time spent on math and reading work (Rose, 2015). Teachers also tended to skew innovative instructional practices in favor of increased time on rote memorization (Morgan, 2016). In a study by Gonzalez et al. (2017), researchers indicated "high stakes testing lessens a teacher's ability to implement effective instructional practices in the classroom" (p. 514). In a cross-national study, Furuta et al. (2016) contended high stakes testing at the secondary level constrains teachers' ability to expand students' learning. Reese (2013) determined, "high stakes testing, which contrary to expectations, strengthened rote pedagogy and narrowed the curriculum" (p. 232). Teachers and principals need to work together to overcome the obstacles of high stakes testing (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

The role of principals in the era of student accountability is to create and lead organizations conducive to increased student achievement. Any plan to address student achievement must be grounded in both research findings and philosophical concepts. Principals must work to overcome the pressures of high stakes testing to create an increase in student achievement (Cooper, 2018). They can do this by transforming the culture of their building and creating increased effectiveness within their teaching staff (Cooper, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016). Cooper (2018) completed a qualitative study of a high-performing Title I high schools and found principals play a critical role in their schools' success. Cooper developed common themes surrounding the principal's leadership by interviewing staff. The themes included having a vision, employing excellent communication, and serving as a strong instructional leader. Utley (2005) conducted a qualitative study of five successful principals and found systems thinking, creating positive relationships, shared power, and team-building characteristics were common themes of each successful principal. In another study examining teacher growth by Reyna (2019), communication, collaborative planning, and professional learning all helped teachers grow. All of these were features of Senge's (1990) concept of learning organizations.

## Learning Organizations

In 1990 Peter Senge wrote *The Fifth Discipline,* which laid the foundation for "learning organizations." Senge's work (1990), while not directly discussing PLCs at the time, laid the foundation for what education professionals now call PLCs. His work is based on the idea organizations need to be in a constant learning state to achieve success. The individuals who comprise organizations must continually work together to produce

optimal outcomes (Senge, 1990). The process should be recurrent and unyielding (Sarder, 2015a). Five major disciplines create learning organizations. Senge defined the disciplines as "five bodies of theory and method that come together" to create learning organizations (Sarder, 2015a, Timestamp 1:45). The five disciplines Senge defined were personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. The five disciplines converge to create learning organizations- remove one, and the others falter. Senge stated three crucial tools were necessary to develop each of the five disciplines: the tools to do so, a guiding philosophy, and time. Each discipline shares these tools. The organization's guiding philosophy is to direct all decisions and time to learn and reflect. The first step is to shift individuals' mindset and, collectively, the organization (Sarder, 2015a; Senge, 1990).

Stevens (2019) completed a qualitative study of Senge's (1990) five disciplines. Stevens used interviews, observations, and focus groups to study the impact of Senge's five disciplines on the professional development at a rural high school. He found team learning, systems thinking, and personal mastery to have higher ratings than shared vision and mental models. Stevens also concluded team learning had the highest positive perception because teachers feel they were supported by each other. Mental models had the highest negative perception amongst teachers because they believed they were not addressed enough (Stevens, 2019). Stevens concluded, "there was no direct relationship between the prevalence in professional development and the perception of professional development for the remaining disciplines" (p. 148). Team learning was the only discipline to have a relationship (Stevens, 2019). Stevens provides recommendations on how to implement Senge's five disciplines. The most common recommendation was to

create dialogue amongst the staff to build on each other's capacities (Stevens, 2019). Stevens suggested further research was needed at other schools to determine the impact on teacher's professional ability. When examining learning organizations and schools, educational leaders must start with personal mastery, as it creates the foundation for the learning organization to become more successful (Senge et al., 2012).

### *Personal Mastery*

Personal mastery is the first discipline addressed by Senge (1990). Senge postulated for organizations to become learning organizations, each individual must develop a state of continuous learning. The key is to encourage members to have a passion for growth and to avoid becoming comfortable with the status quo. Senge defined personal mastery as the ability of individuals to "grow personally, develop their sense of vision, and their capacity to accomplish the things they want to accomplish" (Sarder, 2015b, Timestamp 1:35). Personal mastery is the foundation of the five disciplines. In order to create the other four, members of organizations have to have personal mastery; the ability to create and recreate a personal vision, a laser-like focus on what matters, patience to allow for development, and the skill to look at the world as it is. However, just because members of an organization attain the ability to learn, does not mean the organization itself will learn. Yet, if members cannot learn, the organization will never learn. Organizations must create a climate driven by personal mastery and create a collaborative culture (Senge, 1990).

#### Personal Mastery in Schools.

In his book *Schools that Learn*, Senge et al., (2012) related personal mastery to schools as schools' practices to support teachers and pupils. Senge et al., (2012) reasoned:

> Schools and other organizations have a key role to play in the discipline: by setting a context where people have time to reflect on their vision, by establishing an organizational commitment to the truth wherever possible, and by avoiding taking a position about what other people should want or how they should view the world. (p. 76)

When schools do this, they give both teachers and students the needed tools to achieve personal mastery (Senge et al., 2012). Personal mastery can be a life-long process. Teachers who work to achieve personal mastery are working to become better educators, leaders, and growth fosterers (Senge et al., 2012). Students are just beginning their journey towards personal mastery. Both teachers and students are trying to master the ability to produce their wanted results (Senge et al., 2012). To achieve personal mastery, individuals must spend time regularly in thought and reflection (Senge et al., 2012).

Personal mastery "refers not just to the ability to produce results but also to master the principles underlying the way you produce results" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 77). To this end, teachers must first develop an individual vision, recognize where they currently are compared to where they want to be, and to commit themselves to reach their desired results (Senge et al., 2012). A personal vision enunciates where one wants to be and can only be realized at a personal level and is rooted internally (Senge et al., 2012). Recognizing and "seeing the current reality clearly, including the aspects of your vision that are far from realized" is articulated by the question, "here is where I am- and where we are as an organization" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 78). Senge et al. (2012) contended personal mastery cannot happen without accepting weaknesses for what they are and coming up with a plan to overcome them. Lastly, teachers and schools must make "a

conscious commitment to create the results that are most desired" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 78). The authors further asserted without commitment, teachers may continually fall short of personal mastery, which harms them and the school as a whole. The only way to achieve personal mastery is through an honest reflection of oneself (Senge, 1990). Part of any person's reflection must include recognizing their mental models (Senge, 1990).

### *Mental Models*

Mental models "are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge, 1990, p. 8). To recognize, accept, and change mental models, individuals must look within (Senge, 1990). Senge (Sarder, 2015b) said this is "all about reflection at the personal level" (Timestamp 3:35). Mental models can be in both a person's conscious and unconscious state. They are essential to recognize because they often prove to be less adaptable to change (Senge, 1990). Mental models can cause errors in perception (Sarder, 2015b; Senge, 1990). If someone believes something is supposed to be a certain way because of their ingrained mental models, they will likely not change it. This is important for organizations and organizations' ability to become learning organizations because people with different mental models can see or read the same thing and then describe it entirely differently or in a different context (Senge, 1990). To achieve personal mastery, they must scrutinize their mental models, accept them, and then change them when necessary; the same is true for organizations (Senge, 1990).

Organizations must create an atmosphere in which differing opinions are welcomed and one that encourages individuals to spend time reflecting to improve their practice (Senge, 1990). Organizations without this are creating what Senge (1990) called

"skilled incompetence." Skilled incompetence is the ability to be "highly skillful at protecting ourselves from pain and threat posed by learning situations" (Senge, 1990, p. 172). Organizations must be committed to truth at all times in order to overcome skilled incompetence. Unless people are willing to carry recording devices with them at all times to review with precision what was said, mental models will always direct our minds to "see what we see and hear what we hear" (Sarder, 2015b).

**Mental Models in Schools.**

Human behavior, attitudes, and interpretations shape our mental models people create (Senge, 1990). Mental models reside in humans' sub-consciousness, and "because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 99). Individuals must make a prioritized effort to become aware of the mental models they have constructed (Senge et al., 2012). This is important for teachers, schools, and districts because mental models may explain why people can witness the same event but describe it very differently. In schools, this applies to both teaching and learning, as well as perceived behavior. Senge et al. (2012) contended, "the consequences of untested and unsurfaced mental models can be tragic for children" (p. 100). Teachers may treat or teach students differently based on their mental models. Muhammad (2009) contended, "Educators' personal belief systems may be the most potent variables perpetuating learning gaps in our public school systems" (p. 14).

Furthermore, students may react differently to a teacher because of their tacit beliefs. To highlight their mental models, teachers have to work at balancing advocacy and inquiry; "balance advocacy for your view against inquiry into others' views" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 104). During this process, a person may explain their view while also

soliciting other views and then ask others to challenge their views. It is not about being right or wrong but about a willingness to recognize different viewpoints, in order to become more well-rounded. Only after individuals have identified their mental models, modified them when necessary, and started working towards personal mastery, a shared vision may be created (Senge, 1990).

### *Shared Vision*

A shared vision occurs only after moving towards personal mastery and reflecting on individual and collective mental models, because it cannot happen without members of an organization having a personal vision created through personal mastery and the reflection of mental models (Senge, 1990). The shared vision has a give-and-take relationship with personal vision because it is generated from all the personal visions' cohesiveness (Senge, 1990). A shared vision is at the heart of learning organizations because it answers the question, "what do we want to create" (Senge, 1990, p. 192). Organizations whose visions come from the top set themselves up for failure (Senge et al., 1994). The shared vision must come from the bottom up and not the top-down (MIT Teaching Systems Lab, 2018; Senge et al., 1994). In a recent study of 600 secondary teachers, researchers found leaders who build a truly shared vision had a staff who perceived that they were empowered (Ertürk & Nartgün, 2019). Researchers found schools centered around learning, were highly favored by teachers (Ertürk & Nartgün, 2019). Ertürk and Nartgün (2019) indicated a shared vision can only be created only through the active participation of all staff.

People must be willing to have open and honest conversations about what they genuinely want their organizations' shared vision to be (Senge, 1990). The shared vision

will become their united identity. When organizations determine what they want to be and create a shared vision, they will generate the needed focus for their energy. Senge (1990) declared, "you cannot have a learning organization without shared vision… vision establishes an overarching goal" (p. 195). When organizations develop such a shared vision in a collaborative format, the vision directs the work. It takes time to achieve this. The process is both challenging and constant. Such a shared vision brings together the personal visions within an organization and creates a fervor for the work needed to create student success. A shared vision is not about everyone saying the same thing; it is about the coherence of action (MIT Teaching Systems Lab, 2018).

**Shared Vision in Schools.**

A shared vision represents the ability to accomplish the agreed-upon common purpose and goals by utilizing all resources (Senge et al. 2012). Constructing the shared vision dictates goals and purpose (Senge, 1990). According to Senge et al. (2012), shared vision is represented by:

> a group effort to develop images of the future we want to create together, along with the values that will be important to get there, the goals we hope to achieve along the way, and the principles and guiding practices we expect to employ. (p. 87)

In a recent quantitative study of 199 teachers, Gilliam (2020) found teachers whose schools collectively built their mission and vision were more likely to think their school was adhering to them. Teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders must form the school's vision; it cannot be dictated from the top if it is to be meaningful to everyone (Gilliam, 2020; Senge et al., 2012). Shared vision dictates all other decisions made in the

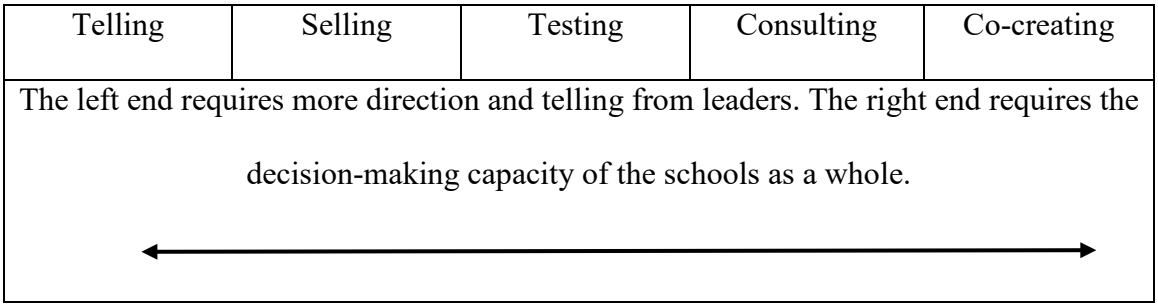
school or district. A truly shared vision is alive and makes educators drive intellectual and emotional thoughts and actions (Senge et al., 2012). In Ramirez's (2020) qualitative study, he concluded building capacity amongst teachers was critical to organizational learning and PLCs. Principals can achieve this by setting the example of the school's vision and shared values (Ramirez, 2020).

Shared visions are created and take a considerable amount of time to have lasting implications. The development process of a shared vision is equally as important as the final product (Senge, 1990). When beginning this process, schools first need to do a self-assessment of where they are currently (Senge et al., 1994). Senge et al. (2012) described five stages at which schools potentially start. The five stages are listed below in Figure 3 (See Appendix C). The stages are telling, selling, testing, consulting, and co-creating. Telling is an authority-driven stage and is driven by leaders (Senge et al., 2012). The second possible stage is selling. In this stage, "the leader attempts to enroll people in something new, enlisting as much commitment as possible" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 91). Both the selling and telling stages have limits because they are leader-driven and do not build individuals' capacity to make decisions. The third stage is testing and is not as limited as the first two stages because it asks others for their input and opinions. In the testing stage, the leader pitches an idea and solicits feedback to facilitate changes (Senge et al., 2012). Consulting is the fourth possible starting point. In this stage, leaders ask open-ended questions to generate ideas on what stakeholders should do. Senge et al. stated, "this is the preferred stage for educators and school system leaders who recognize that they cannot possibly have all the answers" (p. 93). The last stage is co-creating. Senge et al. (2012) defined co-creating as "when people are working for a set of goals

that they have helped to create- rather than goals they set to please someone else… (p. 94). The co-creating stage allows everyone in the school to build a shared capacity in the decision-making process. Regardless of where schools or systems start, the goal is to advance to the shared vision's co-creating stage. "In this way, a shared vision process provides a developmental path for those who wish to become leaders- in the classroom, the school, or the community" (Senge, 2012, p. 95). When organizations reach a shared vision, they can then start the discipline of team learning.

**Figure 3**

*Shared Vision Continuum*




Note. Starting stages of a shared vision for learning schools. Adapted from "Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education by Peter Senge, 2012, p. 89, Copyright 2012 by Crown Business.

### *Team Learning*

Organizations who foster the growth of personal mastery, the reflection and acceptance of mental models, and the creation of shared vision also need to emphasize team learning (Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) said, "team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire" (p. 218). Influential people often fail because they are not a member of a learning team.

When teams do not learn together, they are not allied to the same goals, thus creating wasted energy (Senge, 1990). An example of this is a professional sports team with several superstars who play for themselves. The superstars may lose to a team without superstars because they play for themselves and not for each other. Members of the team must commit to each other (Killion & Roy, 2010). This discipline requires open and honest discussion amongst members. Teams should not hear just for hearing's sake; instead, "the purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one individual's understanding" (Senge, 1990, p. 223) and create an atmosphere of acceptance for different insights. Open dialogue can create conflict, but conflict often creates the best results because it is indicative of a team learning from each other (Senge, 1990). Within learning organizations, team learning involves each member learning on their own, learning together, and relying on each other to learn. Senge (Sarder, 2015b) said, "what creates a real learning environment of team is a group of people who are humble and willing to reflect with each other" (Timestamp 4:52). Individuals working together to overcome obstacles are always stronger than individuals (Senge, 1990).

**Team Learning in Schools.**

Schools and districts have different teams throughout their organizations. By definition, a team is made up of individuals working in unison to achieve (Senge et al., 2012). Schools may have several different teams within their building, for example, grade-level teams, content teams, leadership teams, and instructional teams. Team members work to achieve their team-determined goals. Senge et al. (2012) stated "team members do not need to think alike- indeed, it is unlikely that they ever will, there is no reason that they should" (p. 115). Rarely do teams in schools have members who all think

alike or agree. The premise behind teams is they generate different ideas to build a shared capacity to overcome obstacles and achieve success. The process does not end after a decision but is a continuous process. Senge et al. (2012) contended, "team learning, by contrast, is a discipline of regularly transforming day-to-day communication skills, in teacher meetings, staff development, and the classroom itself" (p. 115). Team learning is derived from personal mastery, mental models, and shared vision. The questions teachers and school teams ask themselves and each other, often lays the foundation for team learning.

Team learning happens for students, teachers, schools, and districts when they reach alignment. Williams and Hierck (2015) said, "Authentic alignment helps connect what we do in schools with the why" (p. 44). For students, team learning alignment happens when students are involved in learning for themselves and others (Senge et al., 2012). Regarding teachers and schools, alignment to team learning happens when educators understand and appreciate other people, opinions, and ideas. To succeed in creating alignment of team learning, dialogue in schools is of paramount importance (Senge et al., 2012). Dialogue allows stakeholders to express ideas, collaborate, and overcome differences. Once educators understand each other's thought processes, they can better work together (Senge et al., 2012). In a recent study of principals and PLCs, Ramirez (2020) concluded learning must be teacher committed and not just student committed. Gilliam (2020) studied teacher perceptions and found teachers believed they worked best when sharing ideas through genuine dialogue.

### *Systems Thinking*

The fifth and final discipline of Senge's (1990) learning organizations is systems thinking, which encompasses the ability to examine the complexity of the other disciplines' interactions. Systems thinking is the discipline that integrates and creates a synergy between all the other disciplines. Learning organizations is best understood by examining the system as a whole and not just individual parts (Senge, 1990). In essence, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Each part is vital to the whole ensemble because, without each part, the system fails to operate at capacity; thus, a learning organization cannot happens. Systems thinking relates to personal mastery by "integrating reason and intuition" (Senge, 1990, p. 158). Systems thinking connects reason and intuition into a useful resource. Senge contended mental models and systems thinking align because mental models focus on realizing the group's assumptions, and systems thinking focuses on remolding the group's assumptions. Together, they shape how members of the organization think and act going forward. Systems thinking and shared vision also intersect. Senge stated, "vision paints the picture of what we want to create. Systems thinking reveals how we have created what we currently have" (p. 214). By understanding the background and motivation of others, individuals can better move forward with the end goal in mind. Lastly, team members need to recognize their organization's complexity and work together with myriad tools at their disposal, for the best possible outcomes for team learning to occur in an organization (Senge, 1990). Systems thinking establishes dynamic systems for organizations so they can grow and lead change (Senge, 1990).

### Systems Thinking in Schools.

Senge et al. (2012) defined the discipline of systems thinking as "the study of system structure and behaviors" (p. 124). In schools, there is a multitude of different structures and behaviors. Infrastructure, certified staff, classified staff, teams, leadership, and resources encompass different structures and behaviors. "Systems thinking is the ability to understand (and sometimes to predict) interactions and relationships in complex, dynamic systems- the kinds of systems we are surrounded by and embedded in" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 275). The progress teachers and students make towards goals and achievement primarily relies on systems thinking. Senge et al. stated, "a quality education hinges on a whole suite of life choices and a way of learning how to make them" (p. 125). Systems thinking can positively impact the outcomes of an organization if systems work together as part of a learning organization, or it can be harmful if the systems do not work together. Feedback is essential for systems to work efficiently. Systems thinking is the process that brings everything together (Senge, 1990). It connects the different parts to attain synergy. In schools, systems thinking can be defined as stakeholders working together towards unified goals. Systems support teachers and increase teacher professional capacity (Senge et al., 2012) and also offers “students a more effective way of interpreting the complexities of the world around them” (Senge et al., 2012, p. 270). Systems thinking enables schools to sustain improvement (Reeves, 2010).

## *Summary of Learning Organizations*

Senge's (1990) learning organization concept established the foundation for increased capacity within an organization. The five systems of a learning organization create a foundation for continual learning. Personal mastery drives individuals. Mental

models is the system of recognition for why people think the way they do. A shared vision establishes what an organization wants to become. Team learning is the system consistently working towards improving both the team and individuals. Finally, systems thinking is the system that connects all the other disciplines. Senge's concept of learning organizations was not explicitly developed for schools. DuFour and Eaker (1998) elaborated on this, as they discussed the characteristics of a professional learning community (PLC), which closely aligned to the characteristics of Senge's learning organizations. Senge et al. (2012) later adapted his learning organization concept to educational reform when he wrote *Schools that Learn*. The concept of learning organizations and PLCs intersect and coalesce.

## Professional Learning Communities

PLCs are not a new concept to K-12 education. In the 1960s, educational leaders implemented PLCs in an attempt to reform teachers who performed as if they were independent contractors (Solution Tree, n.d.). During the 1980s, many researchers and educational reformers discussed characteristics of PLCs but did not label them as PLCs or put them together into a framework encompassing all of the different concepts (Hawley et al., 1984; Nias et al., 1989; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990). In the 1990s, the work of Senge (1990), McLaughlin and Talbert (1993), Louis and Kruse (1995), Hord (1997), and DuFour and Eaker (1998) laid the foundation for what is known as PLCs today. Richard DuFour is considered by many the modern-day father of PLCs because of his work to make the PLC movement mainstream (Solution Tree, n.d.). Fullan (2006) said, "the gold standard for fostering the development of PLCs comes from Richard DuFour and his colleagues" (p. 13). PLCs continued to evolve and develop through the

2000s and are considered significant reforms practiced across the United States today. Some previous research indicated PLCs lead to an increase in students' achievement (Marzano et al., 2016; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020). Fullan contended one reason PLCs became more mainstream was their shift from primarily being a concept of research to a concept of development and practice. DuFour led the charge to facilitate the growth, flexibility, and down-to-earth practices of PLCs. DuFour et al. (2016) said a PLC is:

> An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. (p. 10)

Richard DuFour (1998) wrote *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* and claimed schools should become PLCs to enhance student achievement through a culture of better teaching practices. The PLCs' characteristics that focus on high student achievement levels are: shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams; collective inquiry; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). The key concept was to ensure teachers worked in collaborative teams to help themselves and their students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The mindset of collaborative teams and collective responsibility was a complete shift from previous practice for most teachers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Collective responsibility and teacher collaborations now are the norms and not the exception (Marzano et al.,

2016). Lonnie Melvin (2011), in *How to Keep Good Teachers and Principals,* suggested integrating the concepts of professionalism and community was at the heart of PLCs:

> Educational leaders get excited about the possibilities when using this collaborative model. Under this model, many things can happen. A team concept is always much more robust than an individual concept and can do much more. Teaching strategies such as authentic instruction, reflective learning, inquiry-based learning, constructivist learning, and Critical Strategies Intervention (CSI) techniques, when used collaboratively, increase student-achievement and teacher empowerment—and the results can be tremendous. (p. 50)

Many school leaders who use DuFour et al.'s (2016) framework for PLCs believe their purpose is to ensure all students can learn. Leaders work together to ensure best practices, provide support, and ensure teachers work collaboratively to achieve this goal. "PLCs promote collaboration among school personnel in an effort to stimulate student learning" (Burnes et al., 2018, p. 394). The most impactful practice to improve student learning is the improvement of teaching (Wagner, 2008). DuFour et al., (2004) cited a report from the National Commission on Teaching in 2003 which proposed the full-scale implementation of PLCs in order to improve teaching professional practice. In a quantitative study of 87 teachers, Bennett (2017) found a correlation between teacher perceptions of PLCs and student achievement. Brodie and Chimhande (2020) completed a four-year study of 12 schools and 50 teachers and found "there is a growing empirical research base showing the success of some PLCs" (p. 127). Muhammad (2009) argued PLCs are the only avenue to accomplish student achievement goals; "universal achievement remains a pipe dream until we take an honest look at our beliefs, practices,

behaviors, and norms of our organization" (p. 12). Moulakdi and Bouchamma (2020) completed a study of 976 students from six different schools and, based on their findings, argued more schools should adopt the PLC approach. Before educators can start to work as a team and collaborate, they must establish their "why" (Williams & Hierk, 2015). Their "why", both as individuals and as a team, will help lay the foundation for their shared mission, vision, values, and goals. This is the first step of the PLC process.

### *Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals*

In schools, a vision embodies a captivating representation of the ideal state (Reeves, 2010). Building meaningful PLCs that lead to improved student achievement is not easy. Schools leaders seeking to begin the PLC process need to start with the bedrock of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2016; Reeves, 2010). DuFour et al. (2016) said, "the foundation of a PLC rests on the four pillars of mission, vision, values, and goals" (p. 37). These four foundations drive the rest of the PLC process and give educators a blueprint. According to DuFour et al., the mission asks why, the vision asks what, values ask how, and the goals ask how to track progress. The first question of the shared mission, "why do we exist," allows stakeholders to come together in individual and collective reflection to clarify priorities and ensure all stakeholders are heading in the same direction (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). For schools to become successful, people must know the purpose (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Purpose is the driving force behind all other decisions. Mission statements are common for organizations and schools, so this is not a new concept. DuFour and Eaker (1998) argued, while many schools use mission statements, they do not build a shared mission; instead, it is given to them. DuFour et al. stated a shared mission is a school's fundamental purpose.

The school and its stakeholders need to recognize values answer the fundamental question; "what must our school become to accomplish this purpose" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 39). Schools must foster open and honest conversations that are collaborative to develop a truly shared vision (DuFour et al., 2016). Visions that come from the top do not work because all individuals must be united to answer what they want to become (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Fullan and Quinn (2016) described the importance of achieving a shared vision another way, saying it only happens with "continuous collaborative conversations that build shared language, knowledge, and expectations" (p. 29). Vision allows for innovative practices, the confidence to try new things, and reassurance stakeholders are in it together. Once a school has a shared mission and vision, everyone has a precise understanding of what they collectively believe and collectively want to become (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). In a qualitative study of a successful Title I elementary school, Wines (2019) found all teachers, staff, and administrators worked together under the same guiding belief that all students could learn. Wines not only heard this during interviews but also witnessed it firsthand during observations. Wines further contended there was a complete commitment to each other amongst the entire staff.

After a school has developed its mission and decided on its vision, it must determine the collective commitments and behaviors needed to achieve the vision (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), shared values are evident for excellent organizations and schools. Values, also called collective commitments by DuFour and Eaker, clarified for all individuals within a school how they should act, fostering collaborative relationships. DuFour et al. (2016)

stated, "achieving agreement about what we are prepared to start doing, and then implementing that agreement, is, by definition, the key step in closing the knowing-doing gap" (p. 41). Agreement on commitments allows everyone to operate under the same norms to attain the mission and vision and creates collective responsibility. Williams and Hierck (2015) stated, "Collective responsibility is necessary for a PLC to be successful" (p. 9). Williams and Hierk further contended that collective responsibility creates a community of teachers working together towards the same goal. Senge et al. (1994) summarized the importance of values best when they wrote, "values describe how we intend to operate, on a day-to-day basis, as we pursue our vision… values are best expressed in terms of behavior: If we act as we should, what would an observer see us doing" (p. 302). Values set the bar for staff and students to operate under the same behaviors to achieve specific goals and accomplishments. A study of teacher perceptions by Held (2017) indicated shared vision and values were among the highest-rated characteristics of PLCs.

When schools establish their mission, vision, and values, they need to create a system for tracking their success level in achieving those commitments (DuFour et al., 2016). DuFour et al. (2016) said, "the goal pillar identifies the targets and timelines that enable staff to answer the question, how will we know if all of this is making a difference" (p. 42). School staff, both teachers and administrators, must work together to ensure they break down the ultimate goal of their mission, vision, and values into manageable and actionable goals or the process and tasks may be too much to handle. "Individuals work interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 42). Working interdependently towards

the same goals allows individuals to use their expertise and know-how. This type of work allows for the collaboration of different ideas that can lead to innovation (DuFour et al., 2016). It also presents the opportunity for a comparison of successes and failures.

Teams should celebrate every goal's achievement to create momentum and pride, regardless of whether it was a short-term or long-term goal (DuFour et. al., 2016). Celebrations help energize teachers, students, and schools to keep completing the hard work PLCs require (Williams & Hierck, 2015). In PLCs, teams who work together to achieve a common goal are known as collaborative teams (DuFour et al., 2016). In a study of teachers' perceptions of newly formed PLCs, Stanley (2017) stressed the importance of mission, vision, values, and goals. Stanley labeled these as the foundation for PLCs. Through teacher interviews, he concluded the DuFour et al.'s (2016) model of PLCs helped both students learn and teachers improve. This improvement happened because of collaboration.

### *Collaborative Teams*

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found a relationship between collaboration and student learning. Ronfeldt et al. defined collaborative teams as teachers working together towards coming goals. Collaborative teams are the heartbeat of PLCs because they involve all stakeholders working together to achieve the common goal of improved student learning (Marzano et al., 2016). Wines (2019), in a qualitative study, found "the collaborative nature of this school's setting allowed members to take risks that they might not take otherwise" (p. 99). DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated, "Working in collaborative teams is essential to becoming a professional learning community" (p. 112). In operational PLCs,

teachers work together in a never-ending cycle to answer the four big questions of a PLC, according to DuFour et al. (2016):

1. What is it we want our students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn it?
4. How will we extend the learning for our students who have demonstrated proficiency?

These questions are the guiding emphasis behind the work teams complete during their collaboration time. This collaborative time is essential and should be put into the master schedule and protected by administration (DuFour et al., 2016). In a recent study, Robinson (2020) concluded it was a principal's chief responsibility to ensure teachers have adequate time for PLCs. DuFour and Eaker (1998) contended teachers must collaborate, and teachers who still choose to work in isolation should be redirected toward collaborative work. DuFour et al. (2016) further asserted, "The very reason any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone" (p. 75). In a recent study, Tallman (2019) found the "overall benefits of the culture of collaboration and its impacts on professional and personal growth were evident in the data" (p. 6). Hattie (2015) said:

> We must stop allowing teachers to work alone, behind closed doors, and in isolation in the staffrooms and instead shift to a professional ethic that emphasizes collaboration. We need communities within and across schools that work

> collaboratively to diagnose what teachers need to do, plan programs and teaching interventions, and evaluate the success of the interventions. (p. 23)

Teachers are smarter together than they are on their own (Hattie, 2015). This collective wisdom comes not only from experience but also from personal mastery. Working together helps the students and teachers (DuFour et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hattie, 2015). In a longitudinal study of 192 schools by Hallinger and Heck (2010), they found a correlation between collaborative teams and student growth. PLCs allowed teachers to "develop new and shared understandings, or a shared repertoire (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018). Teachers must put their egos aside and be willing to do whatever it takes to encourage student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Teams must become the norm and culture of successful schools. D'Auria (2015) said, "the ability to develop and support high-functioning teams school-wide is essential to ensuring improved and inspired learning for all learners- adults or children" (p. 54). DuFour and Eaker (1998) contended collaborative teams share knowledge rationally through collective inquiry.

***Collective Inquiry***

Collaborative teams in PLCs need to work together to achieve their mission, vision, values, and goals (DuFour et al., 2016). This process is grounded in the idea of collective inquiry- what works and what does not work (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Collective inquiry allows individuals to work together to determine the best practices to meet all their students' needs. Collective inquiry not only benefits the achievement levels of students but also provides job-embedded professional growth for teachers. During this phase, teachers question identified best-practices and seek new techniques to help students achieve. Each teacher brings back individual results, and within their

collaborative team, they reflect on the outcomes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). This helps all teachers build a knowledge base of the current field of practices and new practices to develop best education practices for their students. This shared personal practice vital to collaboration and teacher improvement (Gilliam, 2020).

Collective inquiry is both an individual process and a collaborative team process because it builds the individual's knowledge and the shared knowledge of the team (DuFour et al., 2005). Collective inquiry ensures PLCs' effectiveness (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2016). Collaborative teams, through collective inquiry, establish what strategies work and do not work; and also help each other members develop new strategies (DuFour et al., 2016). This is known as action orientation and experimentation. Action orientation and experimentation play a vital part in collaborative teams' decision-making process (Wines, 2019).

### *Action Orientation and Experimentation*

Action-orientation and experimentation in PLCs refer to teachers' willingness to take action and experiment with new thoughts and practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This step of the PLC framework is essential because of its role in changing mindsets, behaviors, and day-to-day actions. Teachers and collaborative teams use action orientation and experimentation to find out what works, what does not work, and what might work for some but not others. Members often feel comfortable with trying new things because of the support the collaborative team provides (DuFour et al., 2016). DuFour et al. (2016) wrote an entire book dedicated to the concept of action orientation and experimentation called *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*; they learn by doing. This step of the PLC process illuminates the

idea of school reform and changing the classroom practices and building to improve student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers can use collaboration time with their collaborative teams to converse about different ideas and practices. They can experiment with those in their classroom and return to their collaborative teams to reflect further. Hord and Sommers (2008) maintained the individual reflection of action and experimentation and the conversations during collaborative times were the contexts in which authentic learning happened for teachers. This learning has been coined continuous improvement by DuFour et al.

### *Continuous Improvement*

In PLCs, "each teacher must use the evidence of student learning to collaborate with colleagues to identify either teaching strengths to share or areas of concern for which to seek new instructional strategies" (Williams & Hierck, 2015, p. 109). Collaboration is the key to job-embedded professional development (Killion & Roy, 2010) and building relationships built on trust, which is imperative (Antinluoma et al., 2018). In two recent studies, Tallman (2019) and Vinson (2018) found trust was vital for building collaborative groups. Group members who do not feel included and who do not trust the environment are not likely to share with the group (Tallman, 2019; Vinson, 2018). However, colleagues who trust and respect each other are more willing to listen and share as a group (Tallman, 2019; Vinson, 2018). If those components are absent, continuous improvement is not possible.

Continuous improvement is the primary point of PLCs. In a recent study of principals who lead PLCs, Ramirez (2020) found a common theme amongst participants about a commitment to learning. This commitment to learning not only applied to

students but also to teachers (Ramirez, 2020). Teachers plan collaboratively, complete the action plan in their classroom, compare the data with other teachers, reflect on the data compared to the desired results, and then reflect on what worked, what did not, and what can be changed (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). Continuous improvement, also called continuous learning or active learning, offers teachers many daily job-embedded opportunities (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The Learning Policy Institute completed a report, *Effective Teacher Professional Development,* (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) and listed active learning as a critical element of teacher learning. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found teachers who participated and were active members of effective PLCs learned just as much, if not more, than non-contributing members of the group. Teachers who were actively engaged in professional growth were willing to accept the challenges as a team and reflect instructional practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Job-embedded professional growth is vital for teachers because it provides opportunities for them to grow daily as individuals and as a group (DuFour et al., 2016). When teachers learned as a group, their collective efficacy increased, and research has shown a connection between student achievement and teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Goddard et al., 2004). Growth is vital because of the fluctuating landscape of education, from changing classroom practices to new technology to the restraints caused by COVID19. Teachers ask students to push themselves to learn and reach new heights daily. Teachers need to expect the same things from themselves and should not settle for the status quo (Fullan, 1993). Fullan (1993) suggested, "you cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without teachers having the same

characteristics" (p. 46). PLCs use data to gauge the effectiveness of teachers and students (DuFour et al., 2016). This is referred to as being results-oriented (DuFour et al., 2010).

### *Results Orientation*

In education, the most crucial focus is upon results, specifically, student achievement. In DuFour et al.'s (2016) model, PLCs start with the results in mind and are directly related to the first three questions asked in team collaboration time: what do we want students to learn, how will we know if they learned it, and what will we do if they did not. In a recent quantitative study of 199 middle school teachers, Gilliam (2020) found a strong indication teachers had confidence in their school's ability to change student outcomes. DuFour et al. (2005) and McBrayer et al. (2018) argued the importance of results orientation lies in focusing on student learning and not teacher teaching. Dogan et al. (2016) found improved instruction for students due to a focus on student learning. Teachers who focus on teaching rather than student learning are not actual PLCs under the DuFour model (DuFour et al., 2005). When collaboratively deciding the school's mission, vision, values, and goals, the school sets its compass to guide staff and students. This focus on the results, upon which the school has decided through collaboration, is critical to students' success (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

An area in which many schools fail is grading themselves on the intentions they have set forward (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). DuFour and Eaker (1998) speculated that effective PLCs "assess themselves based on results rather than intentions" (p. 29). Teachers can painstakingly plan, but fail if they do not yield the desired results. To effectively focus on the results, PLCs must have members who trust each other (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Vinson, 2018). Trust relationships yielded positive results

because teachers provide each other with constructive feedback to improve practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Schmoker (1999) suggested, "data and results can be a powerful force for generating an intrinsic desire to improve" (p. 42). When working in collaborative teams, teachers see everyone else's data and see who had students succeed and who struggled. There is no hiding the data and analyzing the data never stops. When PLCs operate in this fashion, collaboration leads to group-based solutions (DuFour et al., 2016). Principals are the primary factor in ensuring collaboration leads to practice (DuFour et al., 2016).

## Role of Principals in Learning Organizations and PLCs

In a recent study of 778 principals, Hesbol (2019) explored the relationship between principals' effectiveness and their opinion of their school being a learning organization. Hesbol (2019) concluded:

> Principals must be highly efficacious to persuade others to perform at high levels, and must have a strong belief in teachers and the organization as a whole to pursue the types of school improvement efforts and research-based organizational learning mechanisms that can improve student performance. (p. 33)

The role principals serve in their school's PLCs is crucial (Brown et al., 2018). Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016), revealed principals were the most critical piece of school PLCs according to teachers' perceptions. Brown et al. (2018) found school principals who successfully implement PLCs, improve teacher awareness and student achievement.

Research by Bouchamma et al. (2019) found successful PLCs were a result of principals prioritizing them. Principals who run the daily operations of their schools, fill staff needs, oversee the budget, set the tone in the building, lead by example, build shared

capacity and responsibility, and set the organizational boundaries others will follow. One of the essential roles principals fill is being the instructional leader of their building. PLCs useful when they receive constant support by the principal (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Hord & Sommers, 2008). This support needs to come in the form of collaboration, encouragement, a culture of trust, and clear communication (Bouchamma et al., 2019; DuFou et al., 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). When principals provide sustained leadership, they create an environment that empowers teachers to address critical issues (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Marzano et al. (2016) contended building collective capacity only happens when PLCs do the right work, and DuFour and Marzano (2011) argued connecting influential school leadership to student achievement is essential.

A critical component of successful PLCs is the building principal. Principals must ensure an inclusive environment with the free-flowing sharing of resources and dialogue amongst teachers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour et al., 2016; Hord & Sommers, 1998). School culture directly relates to learning within a building, thus, principals can enhance this culture by eliminating structural impediments that obstruct learning (Alkrdem, 2020). Principals who are monocratic in their leadership styles do not promote cultures that benefit PLCs (Muhammad, 2009). Rather, effective PLC cultures are led by principals who build shared leadership and give their staff autonomy (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Muhammad, 2009). This type of leadership is known as distributive leadership, and it has a significant impact on building PLCs (Alkrdem, 2020). Hairon et al. (2014) contended distributive leadership's potential is the enhancement of student achievement. This enhancement occurs because the staff feels respected and empowered to do the work needed to increase teacher teaching and

student learning (Alkdrdem, 2020). In another recent study, Thomas (2018) concluded teachers held principals in higher regard if they built shared and supportive leadership.

Research indicated the principal's role was even more critical in rural schools (Robinson, 2020; Willis & Templeton, 2018). About 33% of all American students live in rural communities (Willis & Templeton, 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) defined a rural school as a school in a "census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (p. 2). Historically speaking, rural students have lagged behind their peers from non-rural schools in achievement and extra-curricular participation (Walden, 2015). Rural communities lack the number of resources compared to their urban counterparts, which puts more pressure on students and teachers (Willis & Templeton, 2018). One way for rural schools to overcome their shortfalls and meet their students' needs was by implementing PLCs within their schools (2018). In a qualitative study of seven principals, Willis and Templeton (2018) found principals who developed shared leadership had successful and sustained PLCs. Robinson (2020) concluded principals were imperative to success because they had the power to schedule teacher time and plan professional development.

## Summary

In the literature review, the researcher examined the history of high stakes testing and the failure of assessments to impact student achievement. While high stakes testing is not likely to disappear anytime soon, PLCs are a major reform being used since the beginning of the high stakes testing era. The findings on high stakes testing, student achievement, and PLC reforms led to the analysis of learning organizations (Senge, 1990)

and PLCs focusing on DuFour et al.'s (2016) model and the cross-section of these two theories. DuFour et al.'s model of PLCs is deeply rooted in Senge's (1990) learning organization concept. The researcher also studied the role of principals in the PLC process. Effective PLCs can improve student achievement school-wide and are led by effective principals.

The researcher analyzed the concepts and key components of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour et al.'s (2016) model of PLCs. While the names for each of the components differ, the characteristics do not. The cross-section of these two theories represents the framework for successful and effective PLCs with the capability to increase student achievement (Figure 1, See Appendix A). The Learning Organization concept (Senge, 1990) has five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. There are six main components to DuFour et al.'s (2016) model for PLCs: shared vision, mission, values, and goals are the first and are followed by collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation and experimentation, continuous improvement, and results orientation. Implementing these two concepts allows teachers to continually participate in job-embedded professional growth, thus improving school-wide teaching, directly affecting student achievement. The road to achieving this is not easy, with many pitfalls along the way. Principals must be the driving force behind PLCs within their school to ensure success. All of the teachers in a school must be committed to the process and if they are not, they need to be redirected toward professional learning (DuFour et al., 2016).

These two concepts have overlapping components. They both start with a shared vision. Both Senge (1990) and DuFour et al. (2016) use the term shared vision to describe

a crucial part of their concepts. Senge's disciplines of personal mastery and mental models form DuFour et al.'s continuous improvement. Mental models and shared vision by Senge overlap to define DuFour et al.'s collective commitments component. Senge's descriptions of shared vision and team learning, together, form the definition of DuFour et al.'s collaborative teams. Team learning and personal mastery (Senge, 1990) connect to form DuFour et al.'s collective inquiry. Senge's systems thinking and DuFour et al.'s results orientation and action orientation, and experimentation connect all of the other parts. Together, these pieces represent the connectedness and synergy of all the other represented components from Senge and DuFour. School principals who utilize the components and capitalize on the connectedness of Senge and DuFour's concepts to implement and run successful PLCs may significantly raise student achievement.

# Chapter III

## Methodology

Allensworth and Hart (2018) completed two studies on the influence principals have on student achievement and concluded it was practically impossible to find a school improving without a strong principal. Their studies included a quantitative study with over 500 schools and a qualitative study with 12 schools (2018). Many authors and researchers considered the role of the school principal as being more important now than ever before because of high stakes testing and the evaluation of schools, teachers, and administrators based on student outcomes (Alkrdem, 2020; Bouchamma et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; DuFour et al., 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hesbol, 2019; Robinson, 2020; Stamper, 2015; Willis & Templeton, 2018). One professional practice many school principals are currently using to help with student achievement is implementing PLCs. The purpose of this study was to explore the professional practice of PLCs. As such, I examined the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of principals who regularly participate in and promote PLCs in their schools.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the research methodology utilized in this study. I include the proposed research design, sampling techniques, data collection procedures, and analysis processes. Furthermore, I explain and describe my rationale for the chosen methods.

## Research Questions

***Question 1***. What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?

***Question 2***. What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?

***Question 3***. What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?

## Rationale

Myriad schools, teachers, and administrators consistently strive to raise student achievement as measured by standardized tests. PLCs are a common practice used by many schools to meet this challenge. In this study, I sought to better understand the role principals play in this process. The work of Senge and DuFour chiefly guided this study. Senge (1990) created learning organizations, which established the foundation for organizations to succeed through continuous improvement. The main idea behind learning organizations is the belief that both organization members and the organization as a whole must be in a constant state of learning (Senge, 1990). Senge listed five disciplines that work interdependently to achieve the state of being a learning organization. The five disciplines are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Senge et al. (2012) adapted his concept of learning organizations to fit schools more precisely. Senge et al. (2012)

contended it was necessary to "involve everyone in the system in expressing their aspirations, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities together" (p. 5). Senge believed schools could become characteristics of learning organizations through the practice of the five disciplines. Senge's learning organizations' closely align with the framework of PLCs as established by DuFour et al. (DuFour et al., 2016; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).These scholars created the structure for modern-day PLCs.

PLCs have become a mainstream practice used by educators because of a shift in ideology in the DuFour PLC framework from research to action (DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan, 2006). PLCs are a never-ending process in which educators work collaboratively to examine professional practices and raise student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). The essential characteristics of the action-oriented model's for PLCs are shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams; collective inquiry; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016). In this model, educators believe all students can learn and work towards achieving that goal. Moreover, principals must lead PLCs to meet this goal (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Hesbol, 2019).

The work of Senge (1990, 2012) and DuFour and his collaborators (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016) established the underpinning for schools becoming learning organizations through PLCs' professional practice. These two concepts share many characteristics and overlap. My study of PLCs will focus on where these models overlap and the intersection of their concepts. The research questions I am using for this study center around school principals, as research indicates they are crucial to PLCs' success (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Hesbol, 2019). Through this study,

I sought to better understand the different life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of multiple principals who promote PLCs in their schools. This type of inquiry is personal and, as a result, is better answered by applying a qualitative methods study.

## Research Design

The study of principal perceptions, principal experiences, PLCs, and the relation to student achievement is exceptionally personal because of the number of human factors that contribute and play a role. PLCs are people-driven (DuFour et al., 2016), and because each PLC is formed by different groups of people, the success or failure of each is a personal one. For those reasons, I chose to conduct a qualitative study. Creswell (2014) contended, "qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). Qualitative researchers should be interested in "learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). The qualitative process is about meaning-making of the experiences of individuals or groups of people (Patton, 2015). When considering the factors of a qualitative research study, such as goals, purpose, theoretical frameworks, research questions, and intended participants, a phenomenological inquiry became the clear selection. Phenomenology aims at understanding why something happens, how it happens, and the essence of the experiences for the people or group of people (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013). According to Merriam (2002), "from phenomenology comes the idea that people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them" (p. 37). PLCs, when meaningfully implemented, are an everyday process by

which educators operate. The goal was to capture, understand, and be able to communicate how the participants "perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2015, p. 115). This study focused on the life, career, and PLC-related experiences and perceptions of middle school principals.

## Setting

The researcher collected interviews and observation data from six different principals, each at a different location. The research setting was located at the identified principals' schools to obtain the most accurate picture of the PLCs in their school (Maxwell, 2013). I originally planned to meet with participants at their schools, however, COVID19 restrictions made that impossible. Interviews were conducted virtually with each participant. A researcher needs to find the most comfortable location for participants to ensure they feel comfortable enough to share their personal stories, reflections, and interpretations (Seidman, 2013). I interviewed each principal three times. The first interview focused on each participant's life history. The second focused on each participant's present experiences with PLCs; and the final interview focused on their reflections regarding PLCs (Siedman, 2013). Observations happened virtually with each participant joining from a setting natural to them; either their office or their home (Creswell, 2014). The researcher also gathered and analyzed PLC-related documents such as agendas, meetings, PLC norms, and PLC guidelines from each of the participants. These three data collection methods allowed for a comprehensive comparison of data. This researcher encouraged principals to give open and honest feedback, which may lay the foundation for student achievement improvements. Using this research design, the

researcher offered principals the ability to reflect, make suggestions, and speak to the impact of PLCs on student achievement.

## Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the instrument in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). In this study, I employed three data collection methods; interviews, observations, and documents. My role in the interviewing process was to ask thought-provoking questions and allow them the flexibility to respond in a manner that was comfortable to them. This is known as a semi-structured interview (Ary et al., 2019). Seidman (2013) stated researchers using phenomenological-based interviewing should ask "open-ended questions" and "build upon and explore their participants' responses" (p. 14). By asking open-ended questions, I created an atmosphere conducive to open-ended responses, which is at the heart of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). I have been a building principal for two years and an assistant principal for three years. My knowledge of PLCs and administrator management of resources helped guide my questions. While that experience is good, I was also keenly aware of researcher bias. As such, I put measures in place to minimize this bias, which are elucidated in the validity section.

## Proposed Sampling Technique

Qualitative research is personal and must be conducted in the participants' natural setting (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, the researcher allows natural events to happen and does not control or manipulate the outcomes (Patton, 2015). To better understand PLCs through my research questions, a phenomenological was the most appropriate choice. Researchers in phenomenological studies aim to better understand and make meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013;

Seidman, 2013). The researcher applied Seidman's (2013) three-interview approach to make meaning of each principal's lived experiences. Utilizing purposeful selection, I selected six participants to investigate the research questions. Seidman (2013) stated selecting participants "who all experience similar structural and social conditions give enormous power to the stores of a relatively few participants" in phenomenological interviewing (p. 59). Maxwell (2013) defined purposeful selection, or sampling, as the "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals" (p. 97). Utilizing participants and sites that are purposefully selected allows the researcher to better understand the problem (Creswell, 2014).

Several different purposeful sampling strategies were candidates for application in this study. However, as this research topic concerned middle school principals of varying backgrounds and experiences in south Georgia, whose schools participate in the PLC process, maximum variation sampling was the most appropriate. Maximum variation sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher purposefully picks participants with differences and variations to record distinctions and develop shared patterns and themes (Patton, 2015). Maximum variation sampling can denote both participants and site settings and gives the research the most effective approach for participant selection (Seidman, 2013).

In this study, the researcher focused on principals' experiences in south Georgia; therefore, I selected participants from this geographic region. Because I also focused on schools with PLCs currently in place, I limited the selection of principals to these sites. I began searching for potential participants by examining the roster of middle school

principals within south Georgia. I obtained a list of all south Georgia RESA districts from the Georgia Department of Education website, and then researched the middle schools within those districts for potential participants. Purposeful sampling is used to get as much information as possible to achieve "useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015, p. 46). Information-rich participants should be selected to ensure the collection of rich information (Patton, 2015). Potential participants met the following selection criteria for this study: have at least three years' experience in administration at the assistant principal or principal level, currently serve as a building principal in a PLC school, lead a building whose PLCs have been functioning for at least three years, and be a principal in south Georgia. To achieve maximum variation sampling, I selected principals whose schools have different population sizes, have different socio-economic levels, and who represent both rural and urban schools. I gave preference to potential candidates who have been at their current school implementing PLCs longer than others. The full implementation of PLCs takes time. Thus, participants with a more extended history were likely to offer more lived experiences with PLCs.

I submitted information for approval to Valdosta State's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before contacting participants (See Appendix D). After receiving IRB approval, I sent letters to superintendents (See Appendix E) and I received approval from the gatekeepers of the principals' schools (See Appendix F) in order to access the research site and participants (Seidman, 2013). Gatekeepers included board office personnel, superintendents, and local boards of education. I explained to all participants who volunteered for this study that it was an entirely voluntary process, and they can withdraw at any time. Potential candidates for this study were initially invited by email to

participate. This email included a formal letter listing the researcher's name and contact information.

Once I selected all of the potential participants for the study, I emailed each of them an informed consent form (See Appendix G). This consent form summarized the study, procedures, and confidentiality guidelines (Patton, 2015). In qualitative studies, participants' words are essential. One way to ensure participants' words are accurate is to record each interview. I asked each participant before beginning each interview if they consented to be recorded. Before starting each interview, participants were asked if they had any questions. They were able to ask their questions, and then they signed the consent form.

## Data Collection

The essence of qualitative research is personal because the researcher is the instrument used to collect data and tell the participants' stories in order to better understand a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Ary et al. (2019) noted most qualitative researchers rely heavily on "interviews, document analysis, and observations" (2019, p. 87). Merriam (2002) listed interviews, observations, and documents as the three primary qualitative data sources. For this study, the researcher utilized three qualitative research instruments to gather data from participants. This study's data collection instruments were an interview protocol, an observation protocol, researcher notes, audiotapes, documents, and document protocol. The multitude of instrumentation tools will allow for the triangulation of data and the collection of different features of the PLC and participants (Maxwell, 2013). Documents were collected from participants' PLCs and included agendas, minutes, and PLC guidelines. COVID19 did not allow for observations

to happen in participant schools because of district guidelines. The researcher examined school websites, school PLC documents, and each school. Since I was not allowed inside of the schools, I visited each school, staying outside and observe the flow of an academic day. I was also able to join PLC meetings virtually with three schools. I generated interview protocols and questions (See Appendix J). Creswell (2014) and Ary et al. (2019) asserted while conducting interviews, observations, and data analysis, the researcher will be an instrument but will at no time be an active participant.

### *Interviews*

Seidman (2013) stated, "Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process" (p. 7). In this study, I utilized the phenomenological interview process to capture participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). This method aligned with the phenomenological design of the research study. Interviews were recorded, reviewed, and transcribed. The process entailed the three-interview series approach with each interview lasting approximately 90 minutes, as recommended by Seidman (2013). I employed an open-ended interview format as described by Patton (2015) as an interview guide. Patton proffered, "An interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person" (p. 439). Seidman recommended interviews be unstructured to allow the participant and researcher to rebuild an experience. The outline utilized helped establish a foundation for each interview and allowed the researcher to seek further understanding or clarification. According to Patton, a strength of the interview guide is "the outline increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent" (p. 438). I developed the interview guide to help recognize and close gaps in data (Patton, 2015).

The first round of interviews focused on the participants' life experiences, career experiences, and PLC-related experiences as an educator (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) asserted:

> In the first interview, the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time. (p. 21)

The researcher asked participants to describe and share their educational experiences throughout their lifetime (Seidman, 2013). The goal of the researcher in the first interview is to establish the participants' history (Seidman, 2013). In the second round of interviews, the researcher focused on the participants' current reality and experiences in PLCs (Seidman, 2013). Seidman stated, "The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study" (p. 21). In this study, the problem of practice was PLCs, so the focus was on participants' present lived experiences. In the last round of interviews, I focused on participants' reflections to enable them to "make sense" of their experiences (Seidman, 2013, p. 22). Seidman defined meaning as "the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants' work and life" (p. 22). He added:

> Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of

their past experiences, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives. (p. 22)

To capture participants' answers and follow protocols, the researcher developed an interview protocol using Microsoft Word. The protocol was enacted in addition to the audio recording of the interview. This protocol contained different segments including a description of the date, time, location, setting, interviewer, and interviewee (Creswell, 2014). It included "instructions for the interviewer to follow, so that a standard procedure is used from one interview to another" (Creswell, 2014, p. 194). The interview allowed for researcher notes and follow-up questions. The end of the protocol included a wrap-up, thanking the interviewee for their time and commitment to the field of education.

### *Observations*

It is important for observers to immerse themselves in the participant's and phenomena's natural settings to learn the "language, understand nuances of meaning, appreciate variations in participants' experiences… nothing could have substituted for direct experience with a program" (Patton, 2015, p. 331). Observations allow researchers to gain firsthand knowledge and experiences they otherwise could not (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) contended the researcher should "plan to develop and use a protocol for recording observations in a qualitative study" (p. 193). The researcher used observations to see the phenomena firsthand (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) proffered observations are used to "gain information about different aspects of the phenomena" (p. 102). The setting, behavior, and interactions all play a role in the phenomena (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher was unable to observe in person because of COVID19 restrictions put in place by participants' schools. The researcher did examine the websites of each school, inspect

PLC documents, and visit each schools location. The researcher stayed outside while visiting the schools and took notes on the various happens throughout. The researcher was also afforded the opportunity to join PLC meetings with three different schools virtually.

The researcher applied an observation protocol during observations. Creswell (2014) described an observation protocol as simple as a sheet of paper divided into different segments. The protocol separated descriptive notes from reflective notes, as described by Creswell (2014). It included the date, time, and location. The descriptive notes detailed specifics about the participants, the setting, conversations, particular happenings, and PLCs' activities within each participant's school. The reflective notes were for my "personal thoughts, speculations, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices" (Creswell, 2014, p. 194).

***Documents***

Merriam (2002) listed documents as a significant source of data for researchers. Patton (2015) stated, "records, documents, artifacts, and archives, what has traditionally been called material culture in anthropology, constitute a prosperous source of information about many organizations and programs" (p. 376). PLC-related documents from participant-selected schools proved to be invaluable in generating data concerning the individual operations and procedures of the various PLCs of the participants. The types of documents collected were PLC-related protocols and guidelines, PLC meeting agendas, and PLC meeting minutes, created by the principal or generated by teachers involved in the PLCs. I ensured the data were collected in a way that no personal and identifiable information was captured.

Crewswell (2014) contended documents provide rich information. The researcher created a document protocol on Microsoft Word by dividing a paper into four main segments. The document protocol allowed for vital information to be available immediately. The top of the page was for contexts such as date, time, and participants involved in document creation. Below that was three columns. The left column was for a summary of the document, the middle was for researcher interpretation and reflection, and the far-right column was for participant reflection (Bowen, 2009). Each participant was given a copy of the researcher's interpretation and reflection once it was completed to ensure for accuracy (Bowen, 2009). Allowing member checking of information, the researcher can ensure the documents were valid and useful. This document protocol served as the first step in the analysis of documents. The second step involved the researcher identifying common themes.

### *Data Management*

Data management was a laborious process throughout this study, with the researcher focusing on confidentiality, data storage, data sharing, and data ownership (Lin, 2009). It is vitally important all records be kept confidential in order to protect all stakeholders (Seidman, 2013). This is the first step in data management. Data were maintained electronically using Microsoft Word and audiotapes and on paper in the form of handwritten observation notes and interview notes. Any time data were collected by hand; they were backed up electronically as soon as possible to ensure they were well-organized and accessible (Lin, 2009). Together the electronic data and handwritten data allowed the researcher to have access to the data throughout the research process. Another critical aspect of data management is the ability to share data when the study is

complete. This allows for the further examination of findings and conclusions (Lin, 2009). Before sharing any documents, it was necessary for the researcher to know who owned what data, especially in terms of the PLC documents (Lin, 2009).

## Data Analysis Procedures

Once the interviews were finished, they were transcribed using a private transcription service. As soon as transcription was complete, I began data analysis. Data analysis should be planned as part of the research design (Maxwell, 2013) because it does not just happen; it too must be designed in order for it to be significant and meaningful. A well-planned data analysis allowed me to analyze data throughout the data collection process. Merriam (2002) contended data analysis should happen simultaneously with data collection, so the researcher does not get a backlog of data. Instead, continual analysis allows the research to stay fresh and generate ideas. The researcher collected and analyzed data concurrently throughout the process, looking for patterns or themes that repeated (Merriam, 2002).

### *Memos*

The data analysis for this research study began with the reading of field notes, documents, and interview transcripts; while simultaneously taking additional notes about the emerging data (Maxwell, 2013). This part of the process is the convergence process, when the researcher determines the components that align (Patton, 2015). In my notes, focused on recurring themes and data connections across the participants. After taking notes, I wrote memos concerning reflections, procedures, teacher connections, and thematic connections. Using memos allowed the researcher to assemble general ideas and

lay the groundwork for a robust yet user-friendly coding system (Maxwell, 2013). These memos were the first step in connecting similar data.

### *Open Coding*

Maxwell (2013) stated in qualitative research, "the primary purpose of coding is not to count things but to fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts" (p. 107). This part of the process is known as open coding and supports the development of codes based on the data collected from participants (Maxwell, 2013) and is also part of the convergence process (Patton, 2015). Saldana (2016) stated open coding, also known as initial coding, "breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences" (p. 115). To achieve this goal, I employed in vivo coding, as described by Saldana (2016). In vivo methods offer credence to the words as they are told by the participants (2016). In vivo coding also assists the researcher in explaining participant context and behaviors and help define their opinions and actions (Saldana, 2016). I sorted data into participant developed connections and researcher-developed ones by making notations. Notations can cover a central idea, one word, one sentence, or a paragraph (Merriam, 2002). I employed this process for each of the three rounds of interviews, for each observation, and all analyzed documents. I then compared the categories. In the end, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity emerged (Patton, 2015, p. 555).

### *Axial Coding*

After scrutinizing all of the data and categories established using memos and open coding, I completed axial coding. Ary et al. (2019) labeled axial coding as "the process of making connections between and across categories in qualitative data analysis" (p. 458). This part of the coding established a "completeness" (Patton, 2015, p. 555). Patton (2015) contended the first part of this is known as integrability, during which a complete and entire picture is created. Next, Patton stated the categories should be inclusive of all the data. At this point in the research project, I reexamined the data to check for any missed connections. After completing this stage of coding, I performed the divergence process. Patton said this is:

> Done by the process of extension, building on and going deeper into the patterns and themes already identified; bridging, making connections among different patterns and themes; and surfacing, proposing new categories that out to fit and then verifying their existence in the data. (2015, p. 555)

By completing the convergence and divergence processes, I developed themes that aligned with the data points in the study.

## Issues of Trustworthiness/Validity

Validity, or trustworthiness in qualitative research, "depends on the relationship of your conclusions to reality" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). Creswell (2014) defined qualitative validity as "the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures" (2014, p. 201). Ary et al. (2019) stated validity ensures the accuracy and truthfulness of the information. Establishing trustworthiness is essential because, for this study, the researcher was the primary data collection instrument. For this

study, the researcher performed data triangulations, participant accuracy checks and, feedback, prolonged participant contact, and conducted an in-depth data analysis.

### *Data Triangulation*

Creswell (2014) defined triangulation as the use of different data sources to establish themes. The researcher can perform data triangulation by "using different methods as a check on one another" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). Data triangulation helps prevent two of the most common threats to validity: researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher bias refers to any alteration of the study due to the researcher's values or expectations. Researcher reactivity refers to "the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied" (Creswell, 2014, p. 124). Memos are one method qualitative researchers use to combat researcher bias and reactivity. The willingness and self-reflective practice of the researcher in identifying possible biases and a plan for dealing with bias and reactivity are helpful (Maxwell, 2013). By using various individuals, settings, and methods in this study, data triangulation was easier to perform (Maxwell, 2013).

For this study, the researcher safeguarded content validity by using multiple data sources to triangulate findings (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation helps ensure the development of themes will be valid because they come from more than one data source. Maxwell defined triangulation as "collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Creswell (2014) recommended using different sources of data to compare and build themes.

### *Participant Accuracy Checks*

Another method the researcher employed in this study to ensure validity was by using the participants themselves to assist in the research process. Creswell (2014) defined this as member checking and involved allowing participants to look at themes and findings to ensure accuracy. Maxwell (2013) called this process respondent validation. It allows for "soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying" (p. 126). Respondent validation was valuable as I made meaning of what participants said and participants checked my interpretations (Merriam, 2002). This process often occurs while drafting the final report or significant themes. Creswell suggested one method of completing is to conduct follow-up interviews after completing the study.

### *Three-Interview Approach*

I utilized the three-interview series approach as described by Seidman (2013). Seidman (2013) recommended three, 90-minute interviews, each with a different focus. In the first interview, I focused on the participants' history; the second on their present PLC experiences; and the third on their reflections (Seidman, 2013). I left at least one week between interviews to give the participants time to reflect on the previous interview, but not forget it (Seidman, 2013). The three-interview approach help this researcher establish credibility because it created prolonged contact with participants and allowed participants to answer questions over time. Prolonged contact allows participants to reflect and put their thoughts into perspective.

## Ethical Issues

The researcher focused solely on the lived experiences of human beings. Great care was taken to ensure the welfare of all participants throughout the study. The researcher upheld strict norms and standards of research compliance with IRB requirements. Seidman (2013) discussed how The Belmont Report, published in 1979, established three basic guidelines to be observed when working with human beings. The first is respect for persons as individuals and their autonomy (Seidman, 2013). The second is beneficence. Seidman listed this as "the Hippocratic imperative to do no harm, and the stricture to maximize benefits and minimize risk" (p. 61). The final guideline was justice for participants, or being equitable and fair to all participants in a study (Seidman, 2013). All participants in this study were reminded of their right to privacy and confidentiality at all times (Ary et al., 2019).

The Belmont Report also established the IRB process (Seidman, 2013). The IRB is responsible for "assuring that research done under the auspices of the institution is done with ethical regard to the rights and welfare of human participants" (Seidman, 2013, p.62). I submitted my proposed study for review by the IRB board at VSU before beginning any facet of the study (See Appendix D). This allowed me to consider all ethical issues to ensure participant welfare was protected. Creswell (2014) emphasized the importance of the researcher planning for the "special needs of vulnerable populations" (p. 95). These populations include children under 18, the mentally disabled, people who have been victims, medical patients, and detainees (Creswell, 2014).

Another method of ensuring participants' welfare is protected is to have all participants sign an informed consent (Creswell, 2014; Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013)

quoted Kelman as stating, “participants have the right to be protected against vulnerability in the process of the interviews and in how researchers hare the results of the interviews” (p. 64). Informed consent (See Appendix H) was the method used in this study to ensure participants’ vulnerability was protected. Creswell (2014) listed nine significant parts of the Informed Consent. They are the identification of the researcher, sponsoring institution, the purpose of the study, the benefits of participating, and the level and type of the participant involvement; notation of risks to participants, assurance participants can withdraw, guaranteed confidentiality, and names of those to contact if questions arise (Creswell, 2014, p. 96). Seidman (2013) adapted the list to eight: an invitation to participate, the risks, participant rights, the benefits, confidentiality of records, dissemination, special conditions for children, and the contact information and copies of the form (p. 65).

It is also essential to get permission from gatekeepers at the research sites in order to ethically conduct research (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) contended, “This often involves writing a letter that specifies the extent of time, the potential impact, and the outcomes of the research” (p. 96). It is crucial to have a clear understanding of the necessary decision-makers before proceeding with the study. I contacted multiple Superintendents in south Georgia to receive permission to conduct research (See Appendix E). For this study, I conducted the research on sites of no personal interest to me. Creswell (2014) suggested it is a bad idea to use sites in which the researcher has a vested interest, as this does not allow for impartiality.

I ensured all data collected from participants, whether from interviews, observations, or documents, was kept confidential at all times (Ary et al., 2019). One way

was through the use of pseudonyms names for participants and any PLC members. This guarantees participants cannot be identified, whether through field notes, audio recordings, transcripts, or documents. All electronic data was stored on the researcher's laptop and on an external hard drive. Both of these devices were password protected and locked in a fireproof file cabinet when not in use that is only available to me. I will destroy all data when they are no longer needed for interpretation, analysis, and the study's purpose.

## Summary

Student achievement continues to play a critical role in America's education system. It is my intent that this study will give a voice to the principal participants and the students they serve. Furthermore, I will use this study's outcomes to advocate for meaningful and student-centered educational reforms. The rich data from interviews, document analysis, and observations allowed me to tell each participant's stories. Seidman's (2013) method of conducting three interviews enabled me to collect information filled with rich data on participant's backgrounds, experiences, and PLCs. The stories garnered from interviews were further enhanced through observations and document analysis. Through this study, I aimed to bring the perceptions of principals whose schools are using PLCs and their PLC experiences to the forefront of education reform in a manner meaningful for student achievement.

# Chapter IV

## Participants

Interviewing allows researchers to gain a fundamental understanding of participants' involvements, motivations, and points of view (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated, "… through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate…" (p. 3). For this study, the researcher sought participants to provide rich descriptions about their perceptions of PLCs to enable readers to better understand their lived experiences as educational leaders in southern Georgia. Seidman (2013) contended, "interviewers using a phenomenological approach are always trying to make the "was" come as close as possible to what was the "is" (pg. 18). Researchers can only understand the "is" through the language of their participants (Seidman, 2013). For this reason, it is imperative the researcher selects participants rich in information. The participants selected for this study met the following criteria:

1. Participants must have at least three years of experience in school administration.
2. Participants must currently serve as a building principal in a school employing PLCs.
3. Participants must be a principal of a building having utilized PLCs for at least three years.

4. Participants must be a principal in south Georgia.

Once participants were selected through purposeful sampling, they recounted and described the story of their lives, careers, and PLC-related experiences through a multiple interview approach. By utilizing multiple interviews, the researcher enables the participants to provide background information, describe their experiences, and spend time in reflection (Seidman, 2013). The six participants for this study shared a variety of common experiences as well as many differences. The description of these experiences along with their analysis provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena for the researcher.

**Lyla**

Lyla requested our first meeting be conducted virtually utilizing an online platform. I planned to have interviews at the participant's schools, but the continued health risk of COVID19 changed those plans. As such, virtual interviews became the norm for my interviews with all participants in the study. In the background of her camera view, the office had degrees and quotes hanging on the wall and a bookshelf with educational works. This interview took place during the summer, before school was in session, so there was no other staff in the building. However, three times during the interview, someone came to her door and she quickly explained she was in an online meeting and would get back to them. These interruptions did not detract from the interview. Principals, regardless of their location, share similar experiences such as those we discussed regarding the start of school. In particular, with school getting ready to start, we briefly discussed the opening of school, staff, and students coming back into the building and changes in place because of COVID19. This discussion of shared

professional experiences seemed to put us both at ease before the interview officially began. Throughout the interview, Lyla's story of her childhood experiences through K-12 education, college years, and professional experiences quickly came to life.

Lyla was born in a small, rural south Georgia town with a strong economic focus on agriculture, the same town she currently lives and works. She has an older sister, and they lived with their mother and father in a traditional home setting throughout her childhood. Her parents eventually divorced after she left for college. Lyla was the more focused of the two children and described her sister as "more laid back and will probably live to be 100 while I will die of stress." Her parents had different expectations for the two sisters, but pushed Lyla harder. "Their support was different for my sister and me; she struggled more than I did," she shared. Lyla realized early in life of wanting to be a teacher due to having a myriad of influential teachers. She set lofty goals throughout her educational career as a student and credits her goal setting and drive to her mother. Her parents were "not fly by the seat of your pants parents with jobs, [or] with anything. Even major decisions, [were] very thorough, thought through things." Their commitment to thinking things through had a lasting impact on Lyla. She is very thorough in every decision she makes.

Lyla's mom finished high school and took some college classes, but never earned a degree. Her father and sister both graduated from high school but had no further education afterwards. Even though her parents did not obtain higher education degrees, she described them as very supportive of her higher education. "It was a priority to them." Her parents set a standard for her and her siblings to work hard and stay

committed. Both of Lyla's parents worked in different departments at the same factory until retirement. The factory remains the largest employer in the county.

Lyla enjoyed her K-12 educational experiences and was an involved student. She stated, “I was very involved in just about any and everything that I could be,” including clubs, cheer, and homecoming. The same close group of friends throughout school she described as her support system. Her graduating class had less than 80 students, so it was a very tight-knit class and community where “everyone knew everyone.” She was aware her parents might find out anything she did, so she avoided trouble at school. Her teachers played an influential role in her formative educational years. She told a story that had a lasting impact on her for years about being in the fourth grade and not being in the “smart” class. When she realized she was not in the “smart” class, she tried to determine how to rectify the situation. “I had a very, very encouraging teacher” at the time. Lyla approached her teacher and asked what she needed to do to get into the advanced class. The teacher created a plan, worked with Lyla throughout the year, and, the following year, Lyla transitioned to the more advanced class. She credited the experience she had in the fourth grade with helping develop her mindset of working hard and doing her best. While Lyla remembered her fourth-grade teacher fondly for pushing her, she acknowledges her mother as having the most significant impact during her K-12 academic years. “She always has been there to push me; she has been that constant. She has been the one that says you can, you should, you will, and I'm going to make sure you do.” She shared that even currently, when her mom assures her she can do something, she achieves it.

Lyla graduated high school in 1996 and originally attended a traditional four-year college two hours from her hometown. She quickly realized, “I probably needed to come back and focus on grades more than social aspects.” Moving back home, she attended another traditional four-year college closer to home so she could commute. School did not come easy to her and she had to study hard to achieve passing grades and graduate. Lyla described herself as a “typical student who had to work hard and had an average social life; however, I did get married when I was 21 to a young man who was ready to be settled, so 23 years later, here we are.” Her marriage has provided her with stability and support throughout her education and career.

Lyla finished her Bachelor's in Middle Grades Math and Social Studies in 2000 and earned two more degrees from the same institution. When she got married, a move to a bigger city found them more centrally located to her hometown, and her husband’s job, where they have lived for 27 years. While they do not have their own children, they have nieces and nephews close by with whom they enjoy spending time and spoiling. Lyla's husband is an inspector for a factory in the town where they live. He graduated from high school, but had no further formal education beyond training from his employer. Lyla described her husband as someone who has sacrificed to help her meet her goals and attain educational degrees. “His gift is to, when I say love, to nurture, to take care of, that is just who he is. He is not a spotlight kind of guy.” She stated her husband has supported her financially, domestically, and emotionally. “I would certainly not be where I am today without his support.” Her husband’s support continues to help her get through the day-to-day stress of being a building principal.

After Lyla graduated from college with her Bachelor's degree, she began teaching in the county where she attended college. She has remained in the same school system for the entirety of her career. At her first school she taught math and various other subjects for eight years and two years at a second school. Teaching the school's most struggling learners in her first school, she credited the experience with "teaching her how to teach." When it opened, Lyla transitioned to her second school and was named teacher of the year and top ten statewide. During Lyla's time as a classroom teacher, she earned her Master's degree with a math concentration because she wanted the pay raise and "I worked in a Title I school and could get it paid for." Two years after moving to her second school, the Assistant Principal left and Lyla became the Assistant Principal.

Lyla did not intend on exploring leadership positions in her school. Six years into her career she worked for a principal who identified her as a potential leader and gave her committee assignments and duties to help her foster this leadership potential. After a conversation with her principal, she decided to go back to school for a specialist degree in Educational Leadership. The principal told her, "You are a leader, you are a great leader, and I think this is something you need to think about." Lyla served as Assistant Principal for two years and then became the building Principal. "My principal left and took a job at the district office, so I was flying solo with less than three years' experience." Spending 10 years as a principal in the school Lyla said she "would not trade it for anything. I worked hard." After ten years in that school, her Superintendent asked her to move to the other middle school in the county. Lyla described being apprehensive because she loved the school where she devoted ten years of her career. "I was invested there. First as a teacher, then as assistant principal, and then principal. The achievement was wonderful.

We had done some real work there that was noticed by our district office and our community." She was initially hesitant about her move because of the time and comfort at her current school, but eventually perceived it as a challenge and opportunity for growth.

Eventually, she returned to school to obtain her Doctorate of Education. Lyla stated she was conscious of being a full-time administrator and simultaneously pursuing a doctorate. As such, she chose a program allowing her "to write your dissertation as part of your coursework." Lyla described the totality of her post-secondary degrees by saying, "The reasons for my degrees are different. The Bachelor's was to be in school and be social. The other three were definitely very much more purposeful and intentional." She stated she currently has no plans to seek another position, indicating her contentedness with her current role. "If something came up that intrigued me, I might change my mind, but I am not seeking anything out." Lyla wants to continue to work with her teachers on improving student achievement. She indicated she could be more hands-on in her current role and not from a position at the board office.

**Tim**

Tim is currently a middle school principal in south Georgia in a small, rural school district. We scheduled our first online interview a week before his teachers and staff reported back to campus. Tim was in his office seated at his desk wearing a polo from his collegiate alma mater. The counter behind him held books, folders, and pictures. We exchanged pleasantries about summer and school opening before we officially began. The interview took place on the first day of teacher pre-planning for my school district, so he asked me how that went. We briefly spoke about what each of our systems was

doing in regards to COVID19 protocols. Having completed a quantitative study for his Doctorate, Tim spoke with me about quantitative and qualitative research differences.

Tim was born and raised in a small rural South Georgia town with a population below 1000. He described it as “White middle class… very religious, a lot of Church of Christ.” He grew up with both parents until the age of six, when they divorced. However, he continued to spend a fairly equitable amount of time with both parents as their houses were within walking distance of each other. Growing up with divorced parents in a split household was hard for Tim. He struggled to pick which parent to live with. His grandparents lived in the same town, so he had the support of several essential family individuals. “I was kin to just about everybody…, so it was one of those safe places where you could pretty much walk kind of anywhere.” Tim spent most of his childhood living apart from his brother. “He lived with my mom, and I lived with my dad, and on weekends we were together at one house.” Both of Tim's parents remarried, and he gained four stepsiblings and a half-brother. Tim described growing up in a split household with other step- or half-siblings as difficult, “but we all got along for the most part.” Tim spoke regretfully about not being as close to his biological brother as they may have been if they lived in the same house. “We still talk, and if he needs me, I'm there, but just the day-to-day type of stuff” is different. There was a strain in Tim’s voice when speaking about his family, growing up in different households, and their sibling relationships.

Tim's mother was a school teacher, “so I spent much time at school.” She taught middle school math and English Language Arts and later obtained her Master's degree and moved into administration. She later started an assisted living facility for patients

with mental illness. Tim's father had a high school diploma, was an electrician, and worked as the electrical department head for a four-year collegiate institution. As a result, Tim said, “we were always at the college, and I was around public school.” Even though he spent time in educational settings with both parents, Tim said his mother stressed education more than his father did. He said he is more like his father in his relationship with his wife, and his wife is like his mother. “I was average to above average” as a student and “was mischievous… but did not like getting in trouble.” He spent most of his time growing up at his parents’ workplaces or playing sports. He credits these factors as influencing his decision to select education as a career.

Tim's K-12 educational experiences were unique and split, similar to his home life. He spent kindergarten through the sixth grade in public school and then attended private school from seventh through twelfth grade. He believes this experience allowed him to “have an understanding of both, and how they work, the good and bad of both sides.” Other than his parents, the most influential figure in his childhood education was a middle school teacher who later became a work colleague and a classmate in his doctorate program.

The constant throughout his childhood was sports. “I played a little bit of everything; basketball, baseball, golf, track, soccer, and cross country.” His biological brother graduated from high school but “is a lot more free-spirited than I am” and currently works for their mother. His half-brother on his father's side is currently attending college to be a teacher. I told him, “Okay, if you really want to do this. And actually, my stepmom was a teacher.” On Tim's mother's side, he has two stepsisters. “One of them got a business degree and is now a flight attendant making more money

than if she owned a business." His other stepsister was medically discharged from the military and is now a freelance photographer. Tim's stepbrother on his mom's side graduated high school and now works for a logging company, and his stepsister on his father's side is a pharmacist.

Tim attended a traditional four-year institution 20 minutes from his hometown. He was initially a business major in college and worked at a shoe store. This experience helped determine a change from business to education. "I started to realize just how much a manager has to work, and I began to look back on my mother's career as an educator with time off and the ability to spend time with family." His love of sports and coaching was mentioned as another reason for switching to education. "I had 13 years in playing sports, so that was another thing that drove me into education." He switched majors to education and early on realized it resonated with him. In sharing his initial connection to the field, Tim recalled:

> When you get into some of the first classes, and you get to do some observation and you have that aha moment with a kid, … when you get to take the knowledge that you have and impart it on somebody else.

He graduated with his Bachelor's in Secondary Math, later returning to the same educational institution to earn his Master's and Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership. Beyond advancing in his profession, he shared a motivating factor for returning to school to obtain higher degrees was because "the state was offering loan forgiveness." After graduating college, Tim taught middle school math for two years since there was not a high school opening at the time. Throughout his career, he taught a multitude of grades and subjects. "I have taught every grade from sixth grade to twelfth

grade in terms of math. I have taught some middle school science, and I have taught some high school science." He taught some electives such as team sports at the high school level. He applied twice for the assistant principal's opening, but was not selected for the position. "They said I did not have enough experience." With 10 years of lead teacher experience, coaching experience, and some involvement serving as a dean of students, he stated, "I thought I was ready." He continued teaching and learning. "My philosophy always was, and I tell the ones I am trying to guide into leadership, you need to learn everything you can about everything." He said he tried to be skilled enough so when someone needed something, he was "the first person that pops into their mind." His mindset of being skilled and ready for anything has helped him tremendously as an administrator working with staff and students alike.

Tim has two elementary-aged sons and currently lives with his sons and wife in a small, poor rural community about 20 minutes from where he grew up. The community they live in has 100% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. Tim's wife is an educator and was a high school English teacher. She now serves as the media specialist for her school. He met her at his mother's school, as his wife's mother worked there as well. Education runs in the extended family, as his sister-in-law and brother-in-law are also educators.

Tim glowingly spoke about how close his own two boys are, unlike him and his biological brother. He shared while he and his wife stress educational activities for their boys, they try not to overemphasize it.

> I see some teachers and parents that are noxious about, "my kids gotta be reading this, reading that." The elementary ed teachers' kids tend to come in very high

> because they work with them all early. They want them to read, and they are above everybody in K (kindergarten) and one, but usually by second to third grade, it all levels off.

He shared how he and his wife take a more "hands-off approach." They ensure their children do their work, but do not constantly ride them about it. He believes this is important because he serves as his children's principal. "I tell them both that if anything happens at school that the assistant principals are going to take care of it." He and his wife would discipline them at home for any behavior issues at school, but Tim believes it is crucial to separate dad from principal when it comes to his boys.

One summer, Tim attended a leadership training in his school and was offered the principal's job. He told his Superintendent he did not feel he was ready to leap from a teacher's position to principal. As such, the current assistant principal, who had experience as a principal in a previous state, but who no longer wanted to be a principal, agreed to do it for one year providing Tim was her assistant principal. "After the first year, we flip-flopped at that point, and I became the principal, so I was only an AP for one year." Tim believed his work across a wide variety of roles helped prepare him to be a principal. "It makes it a lot easier to be a principal when you know about things; you know at least how they are supposed to work." Tim claimed he will always be a teacher at heart. He said he does not miss every aspect of teaching, but asserted, "I miss the teaching part… getting to teach somebody something completely new". Tim is still a teacher, just in a different way. Today, instead of teaching students and children, he teaches staff and adults.

**Eric**

Eric and I scheduled our virtual interview for first thing in the morning during his school's teacher pre-planning. We began chatting about the opening of our schools. Eric is currently the middle school principal in a rural south Georgia community. Early in the meeting, he had to turn his phone on silent because he was often interrupted, and once, someone walked into his office to request his signature. As principals often do, he multitasked and did not let it distract him from the interview. Our interview was conversational and Eric made it easy to ask questions to better understand his story.

Eric grew up with his father, mother, and two older sisters in a traditional home. They lived in a small, low socio-economic, south Georgia town with a high minority population. His dad often traveled for work and was generally away during the week. His father had a high school diploma and some work training. “My dad worked for a company for 35 years, and he missed three days in that 35 years.” Eric described his father as “all business.” On the weekends, they spent time together, but “He expected me to work. He had a small farm, and when I was not at school, I was working on a farm, and that is how I grew up.” As a result, “my mom was our main caretaker.” Eric did not enjoy school from an early age, stating he would not have attended if given a choice. “My mom had to get a job at the school in the cafeteria so that I would attend school.” He completed his K-12 education in the same school system. His mother worked in the schools throughout his educational time there and eventually became a para-professional. Eric was heavily involved in athletics as a child and played baseball and football. “I started playing at the Y, baseball and football, and the coaches just had a huge [impact because] my dad was not there. They just had a huge part of everything.” Athletics was

an essential part of his childhood and continued to shape him as an adult. “If it hadn't been for the coaches that I had a close relationship with, I wouldn't be where I'm at today.” Eric’s coaches laid a foundation he would later implement and use in life as a teacher, coach, and administrator.

Eric’s education was essential to his mother, and she stressed attendance. “I never missed school until I became an eleventh grader or twelfth grader and then I skipped a couple of days.” His parents were strict with a curfew on the weekends, and “we didn't do anything during the week except go to school, come home, and if you were involved in sports or band or something.” Eric does not believe his mother ever finished her high school education and believes that is why education was so important to her and his father. “They both saw the worth of schooling.” Eric and both of his sisters graduated high school and college. His oldest sister went to college and “Got a two-year degree in accounting or something and went to work for the city school. She worked all 31 years in the city school as their accountant.” His other sister “Got her degree in education and she is still there at the same school. She is now the principal of that school.” Eric spoke with admiration about his oldest sister maintaining the same job for 31years and his other sister working at the same school for 34 years.

Eric attended a four-year educational institution an hour away from his hometown and, at the time, had not decided on an intended career. He asserted if it had not been for the encouragement of one of his older sisters, he may not have attended college.

> When I finished school, [in] summertime, I had a job at a grocery store bagging groceries. Fall was coming, and my middle sister had just graduated. It was the

last day you could sign up for classes and she put me in the car and drove me, signed me up for classes, got me in the dorm, and that's how I went to college.

Eric remembered when he arrived at college he did not know what he wanted to select for a major. The college he attended put all undecided students into business, which Eric perceived was not a fit for him. “I came home, talked to my coaches and former coaches, and they said, ‘man, you would be awesome at this’ and said, ‘if you go this route, we will find you a job.’” Coaching benefitted him in regards to obtaining his Master's degree as well. “In the coaching network, some of my friends were like, ‘Hey, let's go back to school,’ and we signed up and started going.” It was a two-year program and allowed them to attend classes on weekends. While some of his coaching friends did not finish, Eric successfully completed his program, receiving his Master’s in health and physical education. Eric believed his educational schooling was complete after his Master's degree. “It was one of those things you say, ‘Well, I'm not gonna go back anymore,’ and then the opportunity arises, and you go back.” A south Georgia college offered an Educational Specialist degree program cohort in the city where he was living, making it more manageable. He considered returning to school for his Doctorate but did not think it was feasible, as he may retire before being able to pay for the degree.

After completing his student teaching in the middle school of his hometown, Eric was offered his first full-time teaching job at a school over three hours away in a town he “had never heard of.” Eric spent several years there teaching and coaching football. He was in the classroom for 12 years and taught elementary and middle school physical education before moving back to his hometown. “We [were] expecting our second child, so it made good sense to be around grandparents.” He coached football, track, and

“whatever else they needed me to coach.” Eric waited a few years after completing his Specialist degree to seek a position in administration, stating he wanted to wait to “find the job I just really wanted.” He had experience substituting for assistant principals when they were absent. The full-time, contracted assistant principal job he accepted was at a middle school. He remained in this role for five years and “then they moved me to assistant principal at an elementary under a new principal, and she was awesome.” When the principal of that school left after Eric’s first year there, he became the principal and served in that capacity for 10 years. He then transitioned to his current middle school principal position and has been there three years. Eric shared, “I'm still farming, which my dad kind of instilled in me. I still work every weekend.” He will be eligible for retirement soon, but envisions himself continuing to work either full-time or half-time.

Eric is married and he and his wife have a son and a daughter. Eric's wife graduated from a traditional four-year college in south Georgia with a marketing degree. Shortly after moving to a new city together, they had a son. He and his wife “made a decision early on that she was going to stay home and raise our kids.” Both of their mothers stayed home when they were growing up as well. “My wife worked daycare, she worked different things, but she didn't start working full-time until both of our kids were in first grade.” His wife now works at a local community college. Education was the “number one topic” in their household. Eric described some hardships with his children because of his dual roles as an administrator and father.

> I drove a wedge between them… because of my career and being an administrator. I was the assistant principal when they both came through, and I expected so much more from them. I expected that I shouldn't have to tell them

> things that they know, wrong or right, as far as doing homework. But I drove a significant wedge between my son and me by putting so much pressure on him, and that may be the reason why he didn't like school, but I didn't see it then. I see it now, but our relationship has grown closer as he's gotten older. It was tough from eighth grade through high school. Now my daughter … I didn't have to put the same amount of pressure on her. She's always just followed the line.

Today, his son is in law enforcement and "is 28 now, married, and expecting a child." College did not interest his son. "He'd been in college for seven or eight years; finally, I said, 'Hey, maybe this is not for you.'" His daughter was a good softball player and "She got a partial scholarship to go to college to play." She now works at a mental health facility providing counselors to schools throughout southern Georgia. Eric and his wife are both able to retire now and are excited about their soon-to-be-born grandchild. "My wife definitely wants to try to take care of the grandbaby. If she quits work, I've gotta keep working." Eric indicated he plans to continue working because it is what he loves to do, and he still believes he has the ability to help students and staff.

**Tami**

Tami and I had difficulty coordinating schedules to complete the first interview. Both of us were busy getting ready for the beginning of the school year, and as a result, had many commitments already on our calendar. When the first interview was underway, Behind her was a counter with closed cabinets that had pictures and quotes hanging on them. On the counter below, the cabinets were neatly organized binders and folders. Tami seemed prepared for the interview and had written some notes she reviewed

throughout the interview at various times. Tami is currently the middle school principal in the small, rural south Georgia community where she grew up.

Tami's hometown had a population of less than 9,000, and, "everyone knew everyone." She lived with both parents, an older brother, and a younger sister. Her father was a longshoreman in Savannah, and her mother was an educator for 31 years.

> I had a wonderful childhood; of course, it was tough having a mother who was an educator. She expected great things. She did not accept anything less, so I had a wonderful childhood. My mom and my family are full of educators.

Tami stated she knew she wanted to be an educator early in life because she enjoyed teaching her younger cousins lessons using the book brought home by her family. Tami's older brother "did not want to go to school when he graduated from high school, but he did get his CDL license" He was a truck driver and "recently passed very unexpectedly." Her sister is a victim's advocate in a south Georgia district attorney's office. Even though each sibling took different paths in their educational careers, "Education was stressed daily. It was like failure was not an option. In my family, we still engrain that." Tami graduated high school third in her class. Not only was she an excellent student, but also, she was involved in athletics and extracurriculars, including basketball, volleyball, track, BETA club (a national merit organization for students in grades K-12), and FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America-Phi).

Tami's mother used to share a Dr. Seuss quote with her and her siblings, "The more that you read, the more you know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Tami credits this with laying the foundation for her love of learning and school. She had teachers who "took learning seriously, and I can look back on different, not just

academic lessons but life lessons that they shared as I was going through their classrooms, but my mother would have to be my most influential person." She was also heavily influenced by her grandfather, whom she never met. Her mother shared stories about her grandfather and how he talked to her she was born. "She said that he would say words of wisdom and encouragement, such as, "You can do anything you put your mind to, but you must work hard."" Her grandfather became ill and passed three days after she was born. When she was five, her mother shared a letter her grandfather wrote to her. In the letter, her grandfather asserted:

> You must learn; you must get an education and work hard just like your parents. Remember greatness is not just what you do, but is also how you do it, and you're responsible for how you treat others. Hard work never killed nobody, so whatever you do, work hard.

In addition to her grandfather and mother, Tami's family is replete with educators. Watching them help and support other children inspired her to do the same. She said, "I watched from childhood as [my mother] and several of my family members helped to mold the mind of many young people as they served as educators." Indeed, education was at the forefront of her upbringing. Her parents "would not tolerate" any behavior issues or anything but her best effort. Socially, she was "not a big social butterfly, but not really [an] introvert, not [an] extrovert, kind of middle of the stream." Tami was able to have a singular focus on her academics.

When it came time to select a college, Tami chose to attend the same college her mother and six older cousins attended. The one significant difference at first was, "Initially, I had said I had so many educators in my family I was not going to be in

education." She originally enrolled in the nursing program. As part of her nursing classes, she had to complete observations, and she determined quickly that it was not a fit for her. "This guy came in; he had been shot … blood was everywhere. I told my professor absolutely not. This is not for me. I cannot do this." Thus, she switched her major and received her Bachelors in Education. Later, Tami attained her Masters's in Social Work, a Specialist degree in School Counseling, a Specialist degree in Leadership, and a Doctorate in Leadership. She stated that she is drawn to working with the underprivileged, which is why she sought a background in social work and counseling. "I was always interested in that because when I worked at the Department of Family and Children Services during the summer, I would work with Child Protective Services." Tami's heart belongs to helping children.

Tami lives and works in the town where she grew up, and believes that little has changed. It is still primarily a farming town composed of many low socioeconomic status families. "I think when I was growing up as a child, there were more factories here than there are now. Very poverty-stricken for the most part." The community has a significant minority population with "a very high Hispanic and migrant population." Tami is unmarried with no children. She is very close with her family and often sees her nieces and nephews and considers them "her kids." She shared that she returned home to give back because, "I'm a firm believer that children here need to see [positive] examples as well." She enjoys traveling and seeing other states and big cities, but "I am a south Georgia woman… and it's time to come home. The city is too congested for me." Tami's small-town heart has enabled her to build life-long relationships with stakeholders in the community she serves.

Tami served in various educational roles during her 24-year career. She has been a teacher, an instructional coach, a testing coordinator, a response to intervention coordinator, a school counselor, assistant principal, and now principal. Her goal is to eventually attain the position of Superintendent. When asked about all of her roles, Tami said, "I wanted to be a change agent in education," indicating that this philosophy was the reason for her switch from teacher to administrator. She shared, "I possess the skill-set to help teachers and students become better." Her leadership mantra is a quote by Rosalyn Carter, "Leaders take people where they want to go, but great leaders take people not necessarily where they want to go, but where they ought to be." As a school leader, Tami strives to provide the resources and support necessary to help teachers be successful.

Tami said she takes an active and individualized approach to her leadership style. She believes in being professional and consistent. She clarified that she believes consistency doesn't mean everyone is treated the same, however "I do not believe that success is defined the same for every adult; just as success is not defined the same for all children." This belief is a guiding principle for Tami as the leader of her school. Tami believes leaders should "lead with a servant's heart, make data-driven decisions, and always remember that learning never stops" Tami hopes her actions and passion have a positive impact on her students and staff.

> I believe that it is important for leaders to possess the ability to listen and make decisions with an open mind, strive to be in relationships, and treat people fairly. I view myself as having a strong work ethic, a leader of integrity, possessing the courage to make difficult decisions, and staying focused on the priorities of teachers, students, and parents… Work towards continuous improvement of the

> school climate, to not be afraid to make difficult decisions, to have difficult conversations when needed and work towards solutions and to positively support faculty and staff. When others view me, I want my actions to speak louder than my words.

Tami hopes her actions inspire others and, in turn, that they may become leaders as well. "My purpose is to motivate, empower, serve, and educate." Over the course of her career, she has transitioned from teacher of children to teacher of adults. While she was in the classroom, she focused on growing herself to help her students. She was "always trying to improve." When she left the classroom to serve in a teacher support role, her focus shifted to "growing myself to be a helper" to the teachers. "When I think of leadership, success is growing of others."

**Matt**

Matt is a middle school principal in a small, rural south Georgia school system. Both of our systems were recently closed to face-to-face instruction because of COVID19, so we determined it was best to conduct our interview virtually. Matt sat at his desk, which was covered with papers, folders, and had a baseball glove on it. Diplomas and pictures of his family were hung on the wall behind him. Matt was an easy person to interview throughout. He was open about his background and life story and answered many questions before they were formally asked. During the interview, Matt had to take a phone call from his Assistant Principal but easily transitioned back into the interview.

Matt is a current middle school principal in the city where he grew up, a small town with an agriculture-based economy. Matt is 40, and other than during college, he

has lived in the same county his entire life. He described the area as old-fashioned when he was growing up, and a place where "kids didn't get in trouble at school because they knew what would happen when they got home." Matt acknowledged that an aspect of school that may have changed recently is discipline. "There is no longer any fear of kids from their parents. Parents are more like buddies." He grew up in a traditional home with both his parents and an older brother. His mother was a bank teller at a local bank, and his father worked for the railroad.

Matt described his childhood as "pretty typical." The neighborhood he grew up in had many children, and "whatever sport was in season is what we were doing in the neighborhood." Matt felt supported as a youth. "My mom made sure I was taken care of. She was pretty much our caretaker." He described how his father, working for the railroad, "may be called out at two o'clock in the morning and might be gone three days at a time. So my mom was the role of the household during my childhood." His mother ensured he and his brother did their schoolwork, ate correctly, went to bed on time, attended church, and "kept everything together, so to speak." Even though his father was gone much of the time, Matt still perceived his support as well. "My dad was very supportive and supported his family, but with his job, he was in and out. When he was home, he had to sleep to get ready to go out again". His father came from a sharecropper family in which the 12 children in the family all worked on the farm. "My father instilled in me a lot of good values as far as work ethic goes. My dad went straight out of high school straight into the Navy and then came back to work after." Matt's mother came from a broken home. "She came from a very abusive and drunk father, and her mother

died when she was very young." Matt is proud of his mother because "she made her own way." His mother paid for her own college tuition and earned a two-year degree.

Matt completed his K-12 education in the same county where he is currently an administrator. He originally began his schooling as a pre-kindergarten student in a private church-based school. As a student, Matt said, "I wasn't the most ambitious student. I did what I needed to do to get by." He credited his mother with getting him through high school successfully. "My mom stayed on me pretty hard because there was always something else I'd rather be doing." When he was in middle school, his mother left her job at the bank and began working as a secretary in the counselor's office at the high school and would eventually retire from the school system. He stated, "I couldn't get away with too much at that point because she was always watching me." Today, he realizes his life may have been very different if his mother was not around so much.

> Without her, there's no way I'd be where I am at right now. She was a rock, held me together. I think that was a blessing because I could have went either way when I was in school. I was not dumb. I just was not very motivated, and I see a lot of myself in a lot of these kids now. That is why I preach at them all the time. Don't wait, don't procrastinate, do it, get it done, and don't wait. That's one of my messages to my kids right now.

Another area that helped Matt in school was athletics. "I was pretty talented at baseball growing up, and I played multiple sports; baseball, wrestling, football, and basketball. Athletics was a big part of my life." Matt learned a lot about athletics from his father, even though his father never played because he was always working on the farm. My father's dad "made him come home and go to work, but obviously, he caught on. He was

a good study, he read books, and he knew whom to talk to." Midway through high school Matt would decide to focus solely on baseball and received a scholarship to play baseball at a south Georgia public university.

Matt struggled academically at college. "The baseball in college was great; the academic side was not so good." At the end of his first semester in college, Matt was ruled academically ineligible and not allowed to play baseball. He stated, "this is where not going above and beyond in high school came back to hurt me." Not being able to play baseball, he stated, "could have killed me." Quickly he decided he needed to focus on academics.

> I could either quit and go to work, or I could do what my mama wanted me to do and get a college education. So I said, "You know what? I'm going to." She supported me for a long time, and I knew if I dropped out at that point, it would disappoint her to no end. I was not going to do that to my mom, so I got my act together, so to speak.

Thus, Matt enrolled at a two-year college close to his hometown for the spring semester and earned passing grades.

He then transferred to a community college in Florida to play baseball. "I had two successful years there, and the last year when we started conference play, I had an injury that prevented me from going on anymore." At that point in his college career, he met his wife and considered her future in his decision-making. Matt said of his wife, "She is a godsend, a gift from God, and has saved me in more ways than she realizes." Matt had the opportunity to transfer to another four-year university in Georgia to pursue his degree in education. "I still loved the game, and I still loved being around kids. I still had a

passion for the game, so that's about the time I made a decision to go into education." Matt graduated with his Bachelor's degree in Health and Physical Education. Even though Matt struggled initially during his collegiate career, he persevered and became the first person in his family to earn a college degree from a four-year university. Three years after earning his Bachelor's degree, Matt obtained his Master's degree in Educational Leadership. And two years after completing his Master's degree, he earned his Educational Specialist degree in Leading and Learning in the Classroom.

Matt accepted his first teaching job in a small rural south Georgia county that neighbored his home county. He began his career as a physical education and health teacher. He also coached football and baseball, and developed life-long relationships with "some outstanding mentors." Eventually, he became an assistant varsity football coach and the head baseball coach. Matt remained in that county for seven years before accepting a job in his home county as an Assistant Principal at the elementary school. Matt was surprised he was offered the job. "I applied and got interviewed, and I didn't have a clue what I was talking about, but obviously, I had made somebody happy, and they decided to hire me." Matt was hired to be the assistant principal in charge of discipline. "Every school needs different people for different things, and at that time, they needed a disciplinarian." Matt was an assistant principal for four years between the elementary school and middle/high school. He is currently completing his third year as principal at the middle school.

Matt's wife is also in education and is currently an elementary teacher. Matt and his wife had their first child in 2013, and that was one of the catalysts for Matt to move

out of teaching and coaching and into administration. In discussing his move from coaching to leadership, Matt recalled:

> Coaching takes away from your family, and my wife was very supportive. She never did ask me to get out of it, but I could. It became a problem to me when I knew I was spending more time with other people's kids than I was my own. I grew up in a house, and like we talked about earlier, my dad was a great dad, and he was very supportive, and he was always there for me. I have nothing negative to say about my dad, but I knew what it was like not having a dad around, and I knew I wasn't going to put my kid through that. I was leaving before daylight and getting home after dark.

Matt and his wife have now been married 13 years. They have two children; a boy and a girl. Education is a major focal point in their home because "we know what the world would take away from you if you don't have an education." He credits his mom with this philosophy. "My mom drilled into me because she saw what it was like to live without it." According to Matt, his son is like his wife, and his daughter is more like him. "He just gets it and has a good work ethic. Now the little girl is more like me. We have got to beat it into her sometimes." He believes that because both of his kids are exposed to educators at school and at home, they understand it better. Both he and his wife have their Bachelor's, Master's, and Specialist degrees. While Matt has used his degree to pursue administration, he stated his wife "doesn't want any part of administration and is happy where she is."

**Jason**

Jason is a middle school principal in a south Georgia county. We met virtually on an afternoon that coincided with his fall break. Jason sat at his kitchen table, with a china cabinet filled with dishes behind him. During our interview, one of his daughters entered the room to inform him her practice for the day had been canceled. Beyond this isolated exception, Jason was left entirely alone to participate in the interview. He had, what I would describe as, an infectious smile, and he often laughed, which; made the interview both comfortable and uplifting. Jason and I quickly established good rapport, and his life story flowed naturally throughout the entire interview.

Jason grew up in a south Georgia community with just under 20,000 citizens. Reflecting upon the community he grew up in, he stated, "I feel like it was safer back then. More older people lived there, but the older people died, and the educated younger people have left." He and his three siblings were raised in a single-parent home by their mother. Even though his siblings lived in the house at various times throughout his childhood, he stated, "they were so much older than me it didn't really affect me. My brother was 19 years older than me, and my sisters were almost out of school by the time I came along." Jason was the youngest of the four children. He had one brother and two sisters. Jason's father was a farmer with a fifth-grade education who was mostly absent. Jason stated, "I probably saw him maybe, probably a handful of times a year. Maybe five times a year, ten at the most". His mother was the "disciplinarian and caretaker" who worked a 12-hour night shift at a local automotive factory to provide for her children, which also resulted in much absence. She was not always available to assist him with his schooling. Jason's mother was successful at her job and rose in the ranks of the factory,

ultimately retiring as one of the auditors for the factory. “As far as how much help she provided me, it varied. She worked so much that she slept a lot during the day.” However, Jason still knew what his mother expected of him. “she expected me to go to college.” And, Jason fulfilled that expectation. He stated,

> Of my siblings, I was the only one to go to college and obtain a four-year degree. Every parent wants all their kids to do well, but I was the last one, and I was like the last hope. My thing was, I wanted her just to be proud because she deserved it because she sacrificed a lot for us. It was all about her. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t a disappointment.

One of Jason’s sisters enrolled in a technical school, but she never finished. All three of his siblings worked in the factory business at some point in their careers. Later, one of his sisters obtained her Bachelor’s degree and accepted a position working in a college library.

Jason described education in his household as being important. “My mom expected me to do well. She worked a lot, but she just had a level of expectation.” Jason described himself as “not the best student” and recalled his sisters being far more studious than he was. Jason stated, “It is not that they were smarter than me, but they didn’t have the behavior problems I had. They were just kind of steady. I got in trouble a lot.” His older brother also struggled in school but was “19 years older than me, so we were so far apart I don’t think it had an effect on me.” Jason told a story about when he failed the ninth grade.

> I was misbehaving and really just staying in trouble. My biggest thing was I was hanging with the wrong crowd, and at the time, I was capable of doing more than

> my friends... We just wanted to play and joke and just goof around. I tell people that led me to my first experience of being a leader because, in order for me to get on the right path, I had to step away from my friends.

After the ninth grade, Jason had two impactful people enter his life, a counselor and a tenth-grade teacher. The counselor told his mother, ""He needs to start looking at possibly going to the military," because, at the time, my grades were terrible." He remembered his mom being disappointed because she thought he could do better. When he got to the tenth grade, he had a teacher who "really had an impact on me, and I turned everything around, which led me to go to college." That teacher was a friend of his mother's and told him, "You are making your mom's job more difficult." Jason credited his counselor and his tenth-grade teacher as the driving factors behind him improving in high school and later entering the field of education. However, the person he acknowledged as the most influential was his mother. "She just set the expectation and would do whatever she could to help. I had a lot of respect for my mom, and I never wanted her to be disappointed in me." The respect Jason had for his mother impacted him growing up and continues throughout his life.

Jason initially did not attend college with the plan to become a teacher. "My mom told me to go into computer science because that's where the money was, and so that's what I decided to do." He didn't mind following his mother's wishes as he had always been fascinated by technology. "I was intrigued. My mom bought me a computer. When I was younger, I remember it was a Commodore, and I was always intrigued by it." He applied and was admitted to a Historically Black University in central Georgia, where he graduated in the early 2000s with a Bachelor's in Computer Science and a minor in

business. While completing his undergraduate degree, he took the Praxis tests (teacher assessments to become certified) and passed. This led to him to leave the technology field and enter the education profession. Four years after completing his Bachelor's degree, Jason was accepted and attended a public university in Alabama just across the Georgia-Alabama border. There he earned his Master's in Education with a concentration in Counseling and Psychology. Jason returned to school at a south Georgia university and earned his Educational Specialist degree in Educational Leadership 10 years after completing his Bachelor's degree. He is currently working on his Doctorate and is ABD (all but dissertation).

When Jason started his professional career, it was in the field of his Bachelor's degree. He worked in the technology field for two years but quickly realized he wanted to change professions.

> I realized that I wanted to go back to what I initially wanted to do. So I started the process to get certified. I wanted to do middle grades, so I ended up taking the test in middle grades math.

He passed the middle grades math Praxis and returned to school to become fully certified. "At the time, I was living in Atlanta and had just met what would become my wife who was living in Albany." At first, he attempted to secure a teaching job in Atlanta but said, "It just didn't work out and actually was one of the worst interviews I ever had." This caused him to look beyond the Atlanta area and where his future wife was in school at a Historically Black College (HBCU). He felt confident going into the following interview and thought, "the stars are just aligning." He was hired during the interview and remembering the feeling, he said, "You know how sometimes you just think, you just

know, you know that's where you are supposed to be." The sense of belonging allowed Jason to plant roots and the community and begin a successful career.

Jason taught math for six years and, in reflecting on the school, stated, "I was at the worst school, the worst school there.". After six years, he capitalized on his Bachelor's in Computer Science to obtain an Instructional Technology Specialist (ITS) position in the curriculum department. "I worked in the curriculum department training teachers on how to incorporate technology into their classrooms at different schools in the county. That became my niche if you wanna say." During Jason's six years as an ITS, he networked county-wide with other building leaders. "I got opportunities to meet different principals, see how different schools were run; seeing what worked, and what didn't work; the different climates and cultures." He described this as "The best experience I had" because it allowed him to grow tremendously as a professional.

After six years as an ITS, Jason would serve as an Assistant Principal in the same county. Four years later, Jason accepted a principalship in another county close by and has been there for three years. As a principal, he is constantly striving to assist low-achieving students to reach levels of high achievement. "That is my why. I don't even know if the answer is out there, but I'm determined to find it." Jason indicated that he agreed to be a participant in the study to help another educator try and ascertain the answer to helping low-achieving students reach higher achievement.

When Jason decided to pursue teaching, he left Atlanta, where he lived, and moved to where his future wife was attending college. Jason's wife now works in the medical therapy field, and they live near their places of employment. Their current town is "much safer than my hometown, and the economy is unreal. Comparatively, they are

just going in opposite directions." Just like Jason, his wife values education and has earned two Master's degrees. She has her MBA (Master of Business Administration) and a Master's in Social Work. They have two daughters who are both in school now, and education is a significant focus in their home. They try to lead by example and show their daughters how to meet high expectations and overcome obstacles along the way. "What we try not to do is put a lot of pressure on them. We give them a little room; …We ask them to do their best, and I know what their best is." Jason and his wife consider the subject and the other activities in their daughters' lives. They set high expectations but also do not place too much stress on them. "We try to make them understand it is important, but not to stress them out at the same time." His daughters' success is essential, but he also wants them to live and make mistakes as he did, providing they learn from those mistakes.

## Summary

All six participants in this research study are middle school principals who use Professional Learning Communities in their schools. Each participant had a different story to tell. Their backgrounds, upbringings, educational experiences as a student, and career experiences are all different. However, they each share some common characteristics. Each participant listed their mother as the most influential person during the years of their formative education. Similarly, they each have a central focus on helping students and teachers achieve high levels of success. Their differences, commonalities, and perceptions can only be attained through their life stories (Patton, 2015). Merriam (2002) stated, "from phenomenology comes the idea that people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them" (p. 37). Their

stories help gain a better understanding of PLCs in south Georgia middle schools. The participant profiles in this chapter provide participant background information to establish their experiences and perspective. In Chapter V the researcher will provide the themes, sub-themes, and findings of this study through an analysis of each participants' lived experiences with PLCs.

# Chapter V

## Results

One of the biggest challenges facing American educators is increasing student achievement in the era of accountability. Schools need to find ways to improve student achievement as measured by high stakes testing. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the professional practice of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) through an examination of the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly participate in and promote PLCs in their schools. Many school districts use PLCs as a means to increase student achievement. Purposeful sampling was used to select six middle school principals in south Georgia for this phenomenological study. Principals chosen were from the specified region of the state, had at least three years experience in administration, are currently principals, and lead a building in which PLCs have been functioning for at least three years. Findings from this research addressed the following research questions:

***Question 1***. What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?

***Question 2***. What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?

***Question 3***. What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?

Principal participants were selected from six different districts in south Georgia using purposeful sampling. This method allowed the researcher to better understand the perceptions of participants facing the many typical dynamics principals face in south Georgia. The researcher compared PLC practices for commonalities and dissimilarities by selecting participants who had both conjoint and different factors. There is more than one framework for PLCs. The researcher examined other frameworks to highlight components used by more than one participant as well as components used by only one. Each participant volunteered freely and received no benefit. Participants received an Informed Consent Form (See Appendix H) when they agreed to participate in the study and the researcher reviewed the form at the beginning of each interview. Pseudonym names have been used to protect the identity of each participant. Table 1 (See Appendix I) provides essential information for each participant.

The researcher used transcriptions from participant interviews, observations, and documents to collect data on PLCs (Maxwell, 2013). COVID19 impacted the original plan for observations; however, the researcher was still able to observe the school's natural setting and join multiple meetings virtually. During this time, the researcher used an observation protocol to record data. PLC-related documents from participant schools were examined using a document protocol (Creswell, 2014). The researcher employed an open-ended interview approach to create an atmosphere that elicited meaningful participant responses. An interview protocol (See Appendix J) was used to ensure each

interview followed the same standard format and procedure (Creswell, 2014). The researcher obtained permission to record each interview, and all interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. After completing each interview, the audio file was sent to a professional transcriptionist to be transcribed. Once the transcriptions were received, member checking was performed (Seidman, 2013). The researcher sent transcriptions to participants so they could check for accuracy.

**Table 1**

*Participant Profiles*

| Pseudonym | Age Range | Highest Degree | Total Years in Education | Years of Teaching Experience | Years of Administrator Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Eric** | 50 – 55 | EDS | 31 | 12 | 19 |
| **Jason** | 40 – 45 | EDS | 19 | 6 | 7 |
| **Lyla** | 40 – 45 | EDS | 25 | 10 | 15 |
| **Matt** | 35 – 40 | EDS | 14 | 7 | 7 |
| **Tami** | 45 – 50 | EDD | 25 | 0 | 10 |
| **Tim** | 35 - 40 | EDD | 15 | 11 | 4 |

## Discussion of Themes

Qualitative studies allow researchers to examine perceptions and make meaning of the lived experiences of participants (Crewswell, 2014). Individuals can interpret experiences differently (Merriam, 2002). Phenomenology is applied to understand why something happens, how it happens, and people's perceptions of the experience (Patton, 2015). To get the most accurate picture, the researcher began data analysis throughout the entire process (Merriam, 2002). The researcher coded data during all phases of the process (Saldaña, 2016). This included note-taking, memo writing, examination of

transcriptions, and the analyzing of protocols. The researcher took raw data and converted it into major themes and subthemes (Roberts, 2010). Different researchers utilize different coding methods (Roberts, 2010). For this study, the researcher used the following coding process. I began with attribute coding (Saldaña, 2016), as depicted in Table 2 (See Appendix K). Attribute coding was used to examine the personal background and descriptions of each participant. The information included concerns their childhood, education, personal information, career experiences, and PLC-related experiences.

**Table 2**

*Coding Process*

| Attribute Coding | Analytic Memos | Initial Coding | Coding Organization | Axial Coding | Final Review |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Descriptions of participants' backgrounds** | Researcher memos and notes. | In Vivo & open coding. | Codes & themes organized by research question. | Subthemes were reorganized and checked for links. | Final check for discrepancies. |

Next, I created analytic memos and notes on interviews, participant perceptions, commonalities, differences, and the phenomena (Saldaña, 2016). After analytic memoing, I began the initial coding process. The researcher utilized In Vivo coding (Table 3 – See Appendix L) to generate codes and themes via the verbatim words of the participants (Saldaña, 2016). Then, the researcher used open coding to cluster data together (Saldaña, 2016). This clustered data enabled the researcher to formulate tentative codes and themes to connect participants. After developing tentative codes and themes, the researcher

organized the information by researcher question (Roberts, 2010). Once coding and themes were grouped and sorted by the research questions, I began axial coding. The researcher developed and analyzed subthemes and themes and links between themes (Table 4 – See Appendix M). This process included reassessing the analytic memos, In Vivo clusters, and open code themes (Roberts, 2010; Saldaña, 2016). After the final coding process, all field notes, transcripts, and memos were reevaluated for changes or discrepancies. The codes from the initial and axial coding phases were reconsidered to ensure the data was reliable.

At the end of the coding process, four major themes materialized to the researcher. I was able to converge all of the data from the entire coding process and helped organize data. Each overarching theme contained multiple subthemes. The four themes were 1) PLC Processes, 2) Capacity within Schools, 3) Culture of School, and 4) Student Growth and Achievement. Each of the overarching themes had multiple subthemes. PLC processes included the subthemes of collective inquiry, team learning, and action and experimentation. School Culture encompassed collaborative teams, collective responsibility, continuous improvement, and a shared vision for subthemes. The following central theme, capacity within schools, included leadership, accountability, teacher efficacy, and professional growth and learning. The last overarching theme, student achievement, comprised growth and achievement, rigor, common assessment, and school improvement as subthemes. Table 3 contains an example of data collected through In Vivo coding. These verbatim words by participants help to organize and narrow down the themes. Table 3 is sorted by the major themes. Once the researcher completed the In Vivo codes, participant words were clustered together by theme and subtheme. The

researcher narrowed the number of clusters down. In the end, the axial coding process allowed the researcher to come up with the four overarching themes. Table 4 portrays a list of codes the researcher developed during the open coding phases. The result of the study revealed four major themes and a total of 16 subthemes, four for each theme.

**Table 3**

*Sample of In Vivo Coding Generated Data*

| | **PLC Processes** | **Capacity within Schools** | **School Culture** | **Student Achievement** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Eric** | "Constant conversation" | "Teachers share leadership." | PLCs 100% increase teacher effectiveness." | "Constantly monitoring student data." |
| **Jason** | "Teachers bring different strategies together to see what works." | "Principals have to set high expectations." | "Our teachers work together." | "Student achievement is a reflection of teacher achievement." |
| **Lyla** | "How are we going to get there together." | "Professional Growth Aspect" | "We are always involved in conversations." | "Teachers share assessments." |
| **Matt** | "Helping students achieve is a total team effort." | "PLCs must be a focus of school leadership." | "Teachers are willing and open to help each other." | "Using data to plan and reteach lessons." |
| **Tami** | "Systematic and data-driven." | "I have seen improvement in practices across the board." | "Our teachers are empowered to make decisions." | "Student achievement is improved through PLCs." |
| **Tim** | "Teachers learn new ideas together." | "The best part is the improved practice of teaching." | A key focus is on communication." | "Our student achievement has increased because of PLCs." |

**Table 4**

*Open Coding Symbols and Clusters*

| Code | Description | Cluster |
|---|---|---|
| **CIN** | Collective Inquiry | PLC Processes |
| **TL** | Team Learning | |
| **AE** | Action & Experimentation | |
| **L** | Leadership | Capacity within Schools |
| **ACC** | Accountability | |
| **TE** | Teacher Efficacy | |
| **PGL** | Professional Growth & Learning | |
| **CT** | Collaborative Teams | School Culture |
| **CR** | Collective Responsibility | |
| **CI** | Continuous Improvement | |
| **SV** | Shared Vision | |
| **SG** | Student Growth | Student Achievement |
| **R** | Rigor | |
| **CA** | Common Assessments | |
| **SI** | School Improvement | |

## PLC Processes

PLCs can change student lives because of the focus on student learning through improved teacher teaching (DuFour et al., 2016). PLCs do not just happen. There is a process that needs to be followed to implement effective PLCs (DuFour, 1998). DuFour et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of process when they concluded PLCs are ongoing and teachers must work together in a cycle to achieve better results for students. One of the overarching themes discovered during this study was the importance of PLC processes. All six participants of the study underscored standard procedures that help

PLCs be effective. The most predominant processes were 1) collective inquiry, 2) team learning, and 3) action research and experimentation.

### *Collective Inquiry*

Collective inquiry in a PLC can be defined as teachers working together to find what works and what does not work (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The foundation of collective inquiry in a PLC is collaboration; teachers working together to provide the best education for students (DuFour et al., 2016). Collective inquiry based on collaboration is vital to teachers' personal and shared practice (Gilliam, 2020). Each of the principals participating in this study emphasized the importance of collective inquiry.

When she was a teacher, Lyla noted that she did not believe she had ever been part of an effective PLC. However, in her opinion, one of the reasons PLCs are influential in her school is collective inquiry. Her teachers continually work together to find the best practice for their students to learn. In Lyla's school teachers use student achievement data from common assessments to find explore what practices worked well and what didn't. Teachers are able to work together in both the planning, assessing, and reflection stages. Lyla stated, "this process levels the playing field" for students beceause teachers work together to ensure all students receive the best instruction. Tim echoed Lyla's thoughts on teachers improving their practice through collective inquiry in PLCs. "PLCs are more about the improved practice of teaching." He indicated that student achievement increases because teachers improve. Tim emphasized the idea of helping teachers improve because "there are more variables you can control with teachers and less with students." When asked about the essential part of PLCs, Tim said, "I keep going back and harping on it, but teachers together communicating and exchanging ideas, that is what is

important." The exchange of ideas by teachers through meaningful communication is one of the bedrock principals of PLCs in the DuFour et al. (2016) model.

Tami spoke at length about being data-driven. She contended, "PLCs have changed since I became an administrator. Now I truly see the power." She described the power as being able to affect change in student achievement. Tami trusts student achievement is most significantly affected by data-driven teachers. She argued, "The value of PLCs is that they are data driven." By using data as a foundation for teacher conversations, Tami's teachers are continually analyzing and determing what to change. Tami's school is relatively small, so it makes the data even more critical in her view. "There are not as many teachers to give common assessments, so we have to drill down on what we have." This is a change from the approach of the previous principal Tami said. Furthermore, she specified data-driven conversations are the reason her school has seen a rise in student achievement.

Matt has guided his PLCs to focus on collective inquiry based on data because he believes data are the starting point for improvement. To that end, he has facilitated the establishment of PLC-created common assessments in Math and ELA. "Through CFAs and CSAs, our teachers assist one another on how to cover the standards," he said. By collaborating to create assessments and then help a teacher whose students are struggling, Matt claims PLCs have helped his teachers improve significantly.

Eric perceives collective inquiry as part of collaboration and critical to newer teachers and students alike. Veteran teachers help build effectiveness in new teachers. He said:

Teachers collaborate, new and old. The newer teachers do not have the same skill set as

veteran teachers. They do not know all the tricks of the trade and all of the strategies that have worked and not worked. Why wouldn't we want everybody together talking about strategies that are successful right off the bat.

Jason's perceptions were similar to Eric's. He noted PLCs give opportunities to teachers they otherwise would not have. He said, "It is extremely important that teachers have someone to bounce ideas off of." For him, it starts with reviewing data and identifying which students are achieving and struggling. Jason said, "Teachers should lean into their understanding, and then come together in dialogue to see what is working and why." Both Jason and Eric believed PLCs help with consistency in high-impact instructional strategies.

### *Team Learning*

Team learning is when a group of people comes together to learn, get better as individuals, and get better as a whole (Senge, 1990). Team learning is connected through collaboration and collective inquiry and helps team members overcome obstacles they may struggle to overcome together (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge, 1990). In Stevens's (2019) study, team learning had the highest-rated perception among teachers. Lyla perceives this as a trend in her teachers' perceptions of PLCs and team learning. Lyla has seen student achievement rise at her current school. She attributed this to teachers working together in teams. She stated, "It is beneficial for them to work together to find out how to serve our students best." Lyla noted that this does not mean they all teach the same. She stated, "the teaching is different, and the delivery is different." However, the process ensures students are all getting the same information in a quality manner. Jason agreed, saying, "Teachers develop common terms and common practices. Sometimes

delivery can't be recreated from one teacher to another, but everything else can be common." For Lyla and Jason, PLCs help everyone learn, both teachers and students.

Matt has had similar experiences to Lyla regarding team learning. His teachers agreed to working together through PLCs to learn as a team. In his opinion, colleagues working together in a group to improve produces the most significant agency. He said: Since we implemented PLCs, I have seen growth among my staff and even excitement at times. Before, our teachers were not used to having scheduled PLC time. I have witnessed and heard teachers talking about how they took something from their PLC, implemented it in their classroom, and had tremendous success.

Team learning isn't restricted to solely the teachers in a PLC working together. Matt has seen team learning happen when the instructional coach or technology coach presents new strategies. He said, "because of the collaborative team, you now have others who are in there and help you learn together." Overall, Matt has a positive perception of team learning through PLCs.

Tim believes the power of PLCs is in teachers "gaining new insight and gaining new ideas together." Team learning is about becoming the best teacher possible. Tim said: Teachers have the power to control how they present material and what activities they do. PLCs do not control that environment. What PLCs can control is teachers having a 'toolbox' full of instructional strategies and practices. As busy as teachers are, this only happens through the PLC process. Just like students, teachers learn together.
Tim noted teachers have to lead by example when it comes to learning. He wants all of his teachers to be life-long learners.

At times teachers can get discouraged because of the daily struggles of teaching,

according to Eric. He believes team learning through PLCs has the capability of helping teacher morale. “When teachers work together, they just find a way to make it work.” Eric used COVID-19 as an example of how his teachers banded together to overcome unprecedented challenges. He stated, “When you put together the in-person, virtual, and remote setting kids, we still had a 10% growth in reading.” His teachers did not get disheartened because of COVID-19, rather they adapted together. Teachers learning together helped students continue to grow in reading. This mentality is at the essence of team learning.

Tami has had similar experience at her school. She believes PLCs help teachers become more educated. Tami said, “As they are instructing students through PLCs, teachers become more knowledgeable as well.” The collaborative work Tami’s teachers do is focused on student achievement. By focusing on student achievement, she believes it empowers teachers to communicate freely. They can make the necessary changes to improve student achievement. “When teachers work through the processes within a PLC, they become better educators.” Tami is confident that when teachers work in PLCs, they become more knowledgeable at exhausting all possibilities to help students learn.

### *Action and Experimentation*

Action and experimentation are closely related to collective inquiry. Collective inquiry is grounded in the concept of collaboration and teacher willingness to find out what works best for students to learn. Action and experimentation builds on this concept, causing teachers to look within themselves, past their preconceived notions, and experiment with new ideas (DuFour et al., 2016). Senge (1990) described this as the process of changing an individual’s mental model or mindset. Collaborative teams are

essential for action and experimentation because individuals often fear trying new things in isolation, but as a team, they are willing to take chances (DuFour et al., 2016). In PLCs, teachers can take chances when they share responsibility. Lyla highlighted this as an essential part of her PLCs. She stated:

> I think the dependability on each other, the dedication to each other, and the shared expertise allow teachers to do things together. The fear of failure is not as great. It does take time to develop this type of relationship because teachers have different strengths and weaknesses.

As Lyla noted, teachers engaging in action and experimentation does not happen simply because they are in a PLC together. Teachers have to trust each other and work together for the benefit of the system. This relationship is built over time, "we have to get beyond hurting people's feelings." Lyla believes it takes more than a year of working together to develop this type of relationship.

Eric believes lack of trust between teachers can limit the ability to try new things and prevents some teachers from working together. There are other reasons he noted that might prevent teachers from working together such as not having shared planning blocks or a preference for working alone. He also acknowledged, "Some teachers are not confident enough in their own skill to put it on display." However, he believes PLCs can help teachers overcome these reasons. "Let us be honest, when teachers like each other, they are more willing to have each other's backs and once teachers push beyond that limit, they overcome so much." In Eric's perception, this is all predicated on building trust and working together. This begins with teachers opening up to others and being open to others. Eric and Tim agree about the importance of trust-building. Tim believes

"stepping out of your room" is key to action and as such, experimentation can happen. Tim said, "You have to get out of your classroom to understand a little more. In your classroom, you do not always see the big picture. PLCs can spearhead new ideas and try things that individuals cannot." He continued, "It is especially important for first-year teachers who are already scared to death. Working as a group helps ease their nerves." Tim indicated, PLC teams, through sharing ideas, working together, and finding out what works, can help students overcome achievement gaps.

In Tami's school, the four critical PLC questions drive all decisions concerning students. The four questions are 1)what do we want students to learn, 2) how will we know if they learned it, 3) what will we do if they did not learn it, and 4) what will we do if they have learned it. Action and experimentation should be a part of every educator's toolbox, according to Tami:

> I expect my teachers to take chances based on the answers to the four critical questions that drive our PLC meetings. The answers to those questions should all be student-first, student-driven. Teachers must move beyond what they believe and start to work in the area of what we accept as true in our PLC. If you put kids first, you are willing to try anything.

Tami does not believe educators can learn without doing, just like students. "I never learned anything by sitting back and letting someone else do it," she stated. This mentality aligns perfectly with DuFour et al.'s (2016) idea of learning by doing.

Matt stated his teachers take suggestions in PLCs and implement them. He gave an example of his technology coach working with a PLC to increase the use and effectiveness of technology in the classroom. Matt said before the training, "Teachers

struggled to find ways to implement technology. Most of the time, it was just replacing paper." However, after his technology coach came in and worked with a PLC, he saw it change. Teachers were excited because they understood and started to see the significance of different technology programs. During observations Matt saw students who were more engaged and teachers that were pleased because of it. The openness and willingness of his staff to learn from others and then put ideas into action have helped increase the success of his team.

This aspect of PLCs can be difficult to achieve in Jason's view. "I have seen teachers who think they know everything, so they don't want to change." When this happens, Jason facilitates data discussions to bring all the data together. He said, "Once the data is on the table, they can't argue it anymore." He believes data discussions help new teachers and also can reenergize veteran teachers. "New things are scary, but they are also exciting because you haven't done it that way before." PLCs can help new teachers acclimate themselves to their new school and also provide veteran teachers with new practices.

Collaboration, collective inquiry, team learning, and action and experimentation were all common themes among the study participants. Although, at times, the participants used different words or terms to describe each, the definitions and characteristics of each were the same. The principal's perceptions of PLCs were favorable for teachers to collaborate to develop the best instructional practices, learn as a team by seeing what works and what does not work, and not be afraid to take risks.

**Capacity within Schools**

Effective PLCs can help schools build capacity. Clark (2017) stated, "capacity

building brings a group of people together to work towards a common goal" (p. 5). Clark defined capacity building in schools as "a process to increase the individual and collective abilities of professional staff to continuously improve student learning" (p. 5). This is precisely what a PLC should do, according to DuFour et al. (2016). The participants in this study all described building capacity within schools. They also identified aspects of each subtheme: 1) leadership, 2) accountability, 3) teacher efficacy, and 4) professional growth and learning.

***Leadership***

Capacity building in schools can happen through PLCs and begins with school leadership (Clark, 2017; Ramirez, 2020). The importance of leadership involvement within the PLC process was also common among all six participants in this study. Tami and Jason were both confident that the role of the principal is key to PLCs success. Tami believes it is the principal's job to guide, set expectations, and lead by example. She said the principal should model how PLCs should operate. Effective PLCS are led by principals who dedicate specific time for PLCs, ensure there is a clear agenda with goals that is focused on the four critical PLC questions. She stated it simply saying, "In the end, it is the principal's job to lead by example." Tami tries to do this by being collarboative and open in coversations, and also being willing to show weakness. Functioning leadership in PLCs is more than having productive meetings and being collaborative. Jason said, "the [impact] principals have on students is right there next to the teachers. So principals are extremely important to PLCs." Jason keeps his teachers focused on student achievement by monitoring the PLCs closely and giving consistent feedback.

Matt holds similar beliefs to Tami in regards to principals' role in PLCs. Matt

indicated that principals should lead by example and be willing to share leadership through collaboration. He stated, “My role is simple. I have to set the expectations for our PLCs and what they are meant to accomplish. I achieve this by operating under the same expectations.” While Matt does not dictate every aspect of each PLC meeting, he does set guidelines. Matt stated, “Without the guidance, the meetings wouldn’t be as productive as what they have been. We’ve seen bad meetings before, and we try to set guidelines to avoid those types of meetings.” Matt wants his teachers to take ownership of their PLCs, but he drives the focus.

Lyla stated, “Our superintendent has made it clear if you are not going to be an instructional leader, a PLC leader, you are not going to be a principal.” She indicated, “In a PLC, the principal's job is to provide focus and clarity; you want the teachers to go.” Once clarity and focus is provided, Lyla believes principals should take a step back and let the teachers do the work. She noted that when you let teachers take the reigns, “Sometimes you find strong PLC leaders, and other times you have weak PLC leaders.” Regardless of whether the principal finds strong teacher leaders or weaker teacher leaders, the important aspect of the process is allowing teachers the opportunity to grow and learn from their mistakes. The mistakes, as Lyla calls them, are part of the learning process, she stated. She has seen robust PLCs with weak leaders and weak PLCs with solid leaders. However, she always hesitates in taking the PLC over. “I want them to feel like they are empowered, so they own it.” In her view, the important part is building leaders beyond the administrative team.

Tim and Eric also both believe it is essential to build leadership capacity in other teachers and staff. They try to accomplish this through sharing ideas, asking questions

and creating leadership opportunities for their team. Tim said, “I am constantly asking people how they would do something and what ideas they have. Other people have good ideas out there, and they do not necessarily always go parading them around. Good leaders pull [ideas] out.” When Eric became principal in his current school, he tripled the size of the leadership team because he felt it was ineffective at the time. Eric wanted to get as many teachers on the leadership team as possible so his administration would have a plethora of input. At first, his assistant principals did not like the idea. He said, “Other people's ideas scare some leaders, but I want to hear them all. If we cannot talk about it there, we are not going to be successful anyway.” Both Eric and Tim referenced consensus building among staff. Eric stated, “we want teachers to ask hard questions. If we can sell them, we can sell anyone.” For both, it is about building leaders within their staff. In the end, Tim shared that it is about learning at all times.

### *Accountability*

Educators are currently working in an era of high accountability. This issue is central to the problem statement for this study. Educators have been searching for a way to raise student achievement since this era began in 2002 with No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). One framework they have used is PLCs. PLCs foster accountability amongst all members because the work is done collaboratively, with open dialogue, and is data-focused (DuFour et al., 2016). All six participants spoke about accountability regarding PLCs.

Matt was encouraged by the increase in his teachers holding themselves and each other accountable in their PLCs. He said, “Simply put, I have seen teachers step up their games.” Matt indicated the teachers’ PLCs have allowed them to collaborate and feel

supported even when a teacher is struggling. Furthermore, now that they have implemented Common Formative Assessments (CFAs) and Common Summative Assessments (CSAs), teachers have data to help support and drive conversations. He stated, "With the introduction of CFAs and CSAs, teachers are working together productively. I love hearing my teachers working together to improve." The PLCs in his building are repeatedly examining data. No longer do administrators have to bring the data for teachers to explore. "Now they bring it up because they want to do better." Matt appreciates the accountability PLCs have created. Prior to implementing PLCs, he didn't put value in pointing out a teacher's struggles regarding student achievement. He believed that they may focus less on how to improve it and believe they were being attacked.

Yes, accountability is challenging to develop and has to be monitored continually. This has been a struggle for Tim and Jason's PLCs. Tim said:

> One of the hard things [about PLCs] is the accountability piece. It is hard to put teachers of varying mindsets and skills together in one group and hold them all accountable. At times, some teachers do not believe that another teacher's struggles are their own. But in a PLC, when one succeeds, they all succeed; when one fails, they all fail.

Tim indicated building a collaborative team with trust and open dialogue is essential. He also noted that for principals, "you must inspect what you expect." Jason also used the phrase "inspect what you expect." He said, "The hardest thing for a principal is you get bogged down, and then you don't monitor your PLCs as you should." He overcomes this by making it a priority for him and his administrative team.

Tami noted accountability within her PLCs regarding student achievement had been a struggle since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated, “When we went virtual, parents and students lowered their expectations.” Her teachers had to work together, examining data and practices to overcome these obstacles. “Even though it might not have been their fault, they had to be willing to critique themselves. Both as individuals and as a PLC.” Her most productive PLCs don’t “point fingers at each other,” they believe they are all accountable and responsible.

Whereas Tami mentioned her teachers struggled to overcome low expectations by some parents and students, Lyla noted PLCs have helped her students develop a sense of accountability in their work because the students and their parents see teachers working together as one team. Her teachers are continuously working together. The students and parents, “They see that the teachers like each other. They see teachers together in each other's room constantly working together. It has rubbed off on our students.” The parents have also taken note, “Our parents have seen teachers build relationships with each other. They see it on normal school days, and they see it when they come in for conferences.” Now when parents and studetns meet with teachers, there is a team of teachers working together to help all students. It isn’t the parents and one teacher.

Like the other principals in the study, Lyla noted she believes it is the administrator's job to help with the accountability piece. She said, “Teachers take it more serious when they [administrators] are there.” This connects to the belief Tim and Jason had of inspecting what you expect. If principals want PLCs to be effective and work together, they have to be willing to participate in them.

Eric had to completely revamp the PLCs in his building when he became

principal. He inherited a school where teachers worked in isolation, without common goals or accountability. Eric's PLC journey did not hapeen quickly and took him a long time to get it to where it is today. He said:

> We had to start with the curriculum alignment piece. We needed to make sure what we were teaching and covering was what was best for students. We aren't perfect yet, but we are much better. From there, we had to implement an efficient process to support teachers. They weren't doing it wrong. We just had to give them specific guidance.

Eric has experienced his teachers reacting positively to administrations' accountability. He said, "They might not have admitted it at the time, but teachers want guidance, they want help, and they want to be [held] accountable." Eric believes this helps all of the teachers in his building, both novice and veteran.

***Teacher Efficacy***

Hattie (2017) found collective teacher efficacy has the most significant impact on student achievement. Teacher efficacy refers to teachers' belief in themselves to improve students' lives (Hattie, 2017). Effective PLCs can improve teacher efficacy and help students achieve (DuFour et al., 2016). All six participants spoke about the ability of PLCs to help teachers help themselves. Jason said, "teachers work tirelessly. They want to be great." He has seen very few teachers throughout his career who view teaching as "just a job" or who are only there for a paycheck. They have a desire to be great, he said. Jason believes PLCs help individual teachers and groups of teachers.

Eric knew some veteran teachers who were on the cusp of retiring change their minds and continue their careers because of the implementation of PLCs. "I had two

teachers who were close to retirement, and my first year here, we revamped our PLCs, and it helped them believe in themselves again." He attributes this to the teachers working together to learn new and plan effective strategies. "All of the sudden, they weren't alone; they had a team to help make them better." He believes the PLCs completely changed how the teachers perceived themselves as educators.

Working in PLCs can help teachers discover new ideas, strategies, and methods to use in the classroom. According to Tim, this is how teacher efficacy grows. He said, "The exposure to different ideas, to different teachers, new standards, and maybe even different curriculum; PLCs allows teachers to see a host of different things." Tim's PLCs operate regularly, so teachers are constantly exposed to different concepts. Data also drive Tim's PLCs, so "once they see their data improve, that's when they start to believe in themselves." Tim views the responsibility of the PLC and the PLC members as helping teachers reach their potential.

Lyla believes the PLCs at her school are currently running very smoothly. She attributes this to the value teachers place on their PLCs. However, she acknowledged teachers did not always find PLCs valuable. Early on they did not have input as it was a district iniative. She said, "There wasn't much buy-in." In turn, she had to regularly monitor the work teachers were doing in their PLCs, and sometimes that was the lack of work they were doing. However, once teachers saw the value, they quickly changed. Lyla said, "Teachers started to help each other work through struggles and it finally clicked." Today she said her teachers thoroughly appreciate the work they do in PLCs. "We have teachers who love working in PLCs because it makes them feel enabled and like superior teachers to what they used to be." In her opinion, the students are the ones who have

benefited from the increased teacher efficacy. Lyla indicated she thinks both students and parents know they will get a good education regardless of the teacher.

Increasing teacher efficacy is related to student achievement, according to Matt. He believes teachers should work to grow as professionals just as hard as students work to succeed academically. In his view, teachers are trying to grow every student they have in class. “This is the same [for] teachers. I believe that PLCs have been productive in helping our teachers grow in their ability to help students.” Teacher growth is a byproduct of successful PLCs, in Matt’s point of view. He said, “Having people in the building to collaborate with and lean on helps teachers more than they might know.” In his view, helping other teachers grow may not always be intentional but is a result of PLCs.

Tami thinks PLCs should be mandatory for every school. She believes as a profession, we have moved beyond teachers working in isolation, shutting their doors, and nobody checking on them. Tami claimed investing in teachers is an essential part of PLCs. Tami stated:

> In the old days, teachers did everything alone. They were in isolation. Great teachers could help mold struggling teachers, and struggling teachers couldn’t get help from their colleagues. PLCs, through collaboration and conversation, have allowed teachers to receive on-the-job training regularly. In my thought process, when the teachers improve, the students improve.

The end goal of PLCs implementations in Tami’s building is “The improvement of teacher teaching so that we can improve student achievement.” Tami summarized that leaders often make things more complicated in education but that PLCs help simplify the school's goals.

### *Professional Growth and Learning*

PLCs increase the ability of teachers to overcome hardships in the school building because it provides job-embedded professional growth opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; DuFour et al., 2016). Professional growth and learning were some of the recurring subthemes in this study among the participants. Each participant spoke about the significance of teachers continuing to learn and grow. Professional growth and learning have changed over the years, according to the participants of this study. Gone are the past practices of just sending teachers to RESA training or professional learning opportunities outside of the school and school day. Through PLCs, teachers are given a chance to grow professionally inside of their building and during their contracted work hours.

Tim places much importance on providing his teachers with professional learning opportunities. Tim works with his administrative team and leads teachers to develop and plan and professional learning opportunities. In his building, it is two-fold. Teachers receive professional growth opportunities both in their PLCs and during specifically scheduled meetings. PLCs have allowed Tim's teachers to move away from "always using whole group" learning. Tim believes his teachers who learned new teaching methods and instructional strategies through their work in PLCs. Just like for teachers, students all learn differently. He said, "No one thing fits everybody, which is why we have tried to create so many different opportunities for our teachers." Tim has shaped the make-up of his PLCs to fit his school. Because he is the principal of a Junior-Senior high school, he noted he has had to set PLCs up differently. "In high school, teachers are so content-specific. It is always hard to do large group learning. So we do grade level

breakups instead of the whole big one size fits all mentality." By providing different chances for his teachers to learn, he and his staff can focus on specific needs. Tim believes PLCs provide teachers and staff with life-long learning opportunities they would not otherwise receive as not all teachers want to go back to school to get an advanced degree or travel to receive professional learning.

Matt claimed professional learning is crucial for his staff. He takes pride in guiding the professional learning goals and outcomes. "Professional learning and PLCs are all about what each school makes them." Matt takes a hands-on approach in his building, stating, "Very early each year, I meet with my staff to go over our objectives and to make sure we have a clear vision and purpose for each PLC." Once those are established, Matt lets the PLCs run themselves. He takes a supportive role in hopes the teachers will step up to lead. He added, "I have witnessed tremendous professional growth among our staff." He concluded this is because they have ownership and are not being told what to do. He believes the amount of professional growth in teachers is a direct result of PLCs.

Tami believes PLCs have completely changed professional learning. She said, "Professional learning was not very effective in the past because it was just sit and get. I have seen a shift in professional learning, and professional growth is more hands-on." She appreciates that in PLCs, teachers receive hands-on professional learning. Tami couples the PLC processes in her building with the expectations of TKES for teachers. The professional learning completed through the PLCs in her building allow teachers to receive needed information and then put it in place. She perceives this as a major change because teachers see the true value in internal professional learning. "Today I would say

it is more performance-based." Tami's PLCs have allowed her teachers to become more effective through daily collaboration and communication. She has confidence that teachers become more knowledgeable through PLCs.

When Eric became principal of his building, he revamped the PLC and professional learning processes. When Eric was examing the methods in place, he found them ineffective and not very beneficial to teachers. Their emphasis before was "let's read a novel and answer questions, that means we learned something." His building transitioned to providing teachers with protected professional learning time after school that they were paid for. "We try and do more after-school stuff, and we pay our teachers; this way, they don't miss instructional time." Eric, like Tim, tries to focus his PLCs on both large group and small group learning. "We do some things in large groups after school. We also, on a more regular basis, do small content groups." Professional learning in his building has been much more effective since the overhaul. Teachers can learn and make some extra money, and Eric saves his school money because they are not leaving the building during the day and have to pay for subs.

PLCs have allowed principals to transition from managers to instructional leaders, in Lyla's opinion. "We are so focused on improving our instructional practice, and the students really get the benefit." She said:

> Our teachers have really bought into using PLC time as professional learning time. They might not always view it as 'professional learning' because it is during the day and during their common planning time, but that is what it is. They collaborate, communicate, and work together to get better as individuals and as a group.

She has seen her teachers transition from believing they should only focus on “my kids,” and now all the teachers think they're “our kids.” It has created a culture of shared responsibility in terms of professional growth in her building; they are all responsible to each other. Like many schools, she still has some teachers who haven’t completely bought in, but most of her staff are active members who contribute and benefit.

Jason struggled to find the funds to send teachers to off-site professional learning because of budget constraints. He also believes that in-house professional learning is more advantageous to teachers and staff because when teachers “go to PL off-site, you [the principal] have no idea what is going on.” As a result, he concentrated on professional learning inside his building and has seen a change in staff. By keeping the professional learning in-house, the teachers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their building and they are able to be explicit with their work. The conversation and feedback teachers are able to participate in is more genuine and relatable. PLCs in his school are different than in other schools because Jason’s school is small. However, that hasn’t stopped his PLCs from providing his teachers with valuable professional learning. Jason identifies the time teachers spend collaborating and communicating as the bedrock of professional learning in his building.

Leadership, accountability, teacher efficacy, and professional growth and learning were subthemes of the overarching theme, capacity in schools, among all six participants in this study. As Clark (2017) stated, capacity building happens when people come together to accomplish a collective goal. The goal of PLCs is to improve teachers and help students achieve (DuFour et al., 2016). The perception of all six participants is that to achieve those goals, PLCs must be driven by the principal, and teachers within a PLC

must be held accountable. In the mindset of participants, when this happens, teacher efficacy increases, and PLCs provide job-embedded professional growth.

## School Culture

Senge (1990) stated, “it is important for organizations to develop a culture committed to learning.” In schools with effective PLCs, this is precisely what happens (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers work together to ensure a school-wide culture of learning (Williams & Hierk, 2015). The effectiveness of PLCs begins with individual teachers sharing their expertise through collaborative teams to improve all members of their PLC (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge, 1990). The six participants of this study all talked about collaborative teams of teachers working together to improve each other's practice.

### *Shared Vision*

A shared vision is at the heart of learning organizations because it sets the foundation for what they want to become (Senge, 1990). The organizations' vision drives everything once it is created and helps create a culture of collaboration in which employees work for the betterment of the whole (MIT Teaching Systems Lab, 2018). In schools, teachers should continually seek the input of colleagues through open and honest conversations; this helps build a common language, creates expectations, and increases the knowledge of all (DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The participants in this study all spoke about creating or developing a shared vision in their PLCs. Research has shown that for PLCs to be genuinely operational, a shared vision must be in place (Wines, 2019).

Jason believed, each educator has a vision of who they want to be or what they seek to accomplish. The objective is to get them to work together in PLCs to combine

personal visions into team visions. Jason acknowledged that districts may set the vision for a school but believed teachers in PLCs should be the driving force, and their focus should be on providing the best education for students. He said, "As an educational institution, we all have the same mission regardless of the county, district, or school, and that is giving students the very best." PLCs, help to "shape and define that vision" through teacher communication and collaboration. According to Jason, a vision created in teacher PLC teams is a powerful one because they know the students, the other teachers, and the weaknesses of each. As a result, they see the work needed to realize the vision.

Eric tries to keep the focus of PLCs on improvement for students and teachers. When he became principal, the focus shifted to improving student achievement and teacher practices. He credits that focus with the gains they have experienced because, as he stated, "It allows us to make sure we are all on the same page." Yet, Eric admits, "We still have work to do. Not all of us are on the same page, but we are getting closer." Eric said the vision this year was to be "at or above the state average." This has given his teachers the ability to focus on precisely what they need to do. Eric said, "They know exactly where we've been and can tell you the plan they have to get where we want to be." Eric's teachers are working to help each other reach specific goals. The only way the school can reach the overall goal (vision) is for teachers to achieve individual goals.

Matt worked with his administrative team and teachers to develop a shared vision from the beginning of his principalship. He believed this was the best way to get a positive endorsement from teachers and staff. He perceived a change in his staff and now has a single unit of teachers working together towards a common goal. The common goal allows teachers to be critical of happenings using the same framework. He stated, "We

are now willing to share ideas to help each other and better our students. Our vision drives this all, and I believe it has been this good because our teachers helped shape it." In past schools, Matt has experienced finger-pointing and teachers who only want to work in isolation. Since the creation of a clear and shared vision in his current school, Matt has not experienced that.

Lyla has experienced PLCs as a principal in multiple buildings, and in both cases, shared vision played a critical role. In one school, she felt like the teachers were more invested than in the other school. Shared vision played a role in overcoming some of the struggles. Unlike the other participants in the study, though, the vision came from the district office and was not created in-house at the school. In Lyla's district, central office personnel are very hands-on regarding the model of PLCs being used and the expectations that are set. She stated, "We follow the system's expectations and framework." Even though the shared vision is not teacher-created, Lyla acknowledges that it guides teachers and their PLCs. She stated, "They know what is expected and where we are trying to get to." Lyla gives as much autonomy to her PLC teams as possible while simultaneously staying in the framework provided by the district.

Tim believed that his teachers live the school's shared vision through the work they complete in their PLCs. According to Tim, a shared vision begins with open communication and a willingness to learn from others to achieve. Tim stated, "I want everyone (teachers and students) to learn as much as they can." Tim wants his school to be a learning school for all. That is the vision for his school, and through the work of PLCs, it has become the shared vision of the school as well. Tim's PLCs wanted to create consistency across the school in grading practices and improved instructional practices.

Through this shared vision, they have worked together in those areas to eliminate grade inflation and grades for only completing assignments. “We found out it was not near rigorous enough.” and have experienced improvement. Today, the teacher-led PLCS have stabled a grading practice that is consistent and fair across the board. The shared vision allow teachers to concentrate on what was important. The other piece of their vision was improved instructional practices, and while Tim admits they have not “solely focused” on that, “we’ve greatly improved our classroom techniques.” He credits this improvement with teachers working towards one goal in their PLCs through collaboration and communication.

Tami uses the school's shared vision to redirect teachers when necessary. “I ask them, what is your purpose here? What is your why?” Tami inquires about this specifically because it offers insight into the person has invested in the school’s vision and if they are “all about students.” Tami wants her teachers and students to grow by setting goals for themselves continually. The PLCs in her building also set goals, but those goals must be tied to the school improvement plan. She stated, “All of our goals are linked together. Everything should work towards the school improvement plan because that is our guiding document.” The school improvement plan outlines the vision for the school and gives teachers a direction to get there. Through the work of their PLCs, they plan, put into action, and monitor their progress.

***Collaborative Teams***

The essential characteristic of any PLC is collaborative teams (Marzano et al., 2016). Teachers working as a collaborative team aids student learning and allows teachers to take risks that they may not usually take (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Wines, 2019).

Lyla expressed the importance of collaborative teams in her definition of PLCs. Defining them as a "team of teachers working collaboratively to have critical conversations to help students achieve." She said:

> Collaboration and teamwork collaboration is the bedrock of PLCs. Not only does it help teachers work together and focus on student achievement, but it trickles down to kids. They realize that their teaches are working together to help them. In our building, collaboration is a strength. All the working together also builds a sense of pride in our school community.

Tami echoed Lyla's thoughts on collaboration among PLC team members. She has found almost all teachers are willing to do the work of PLCs because they feel like they have a support team and are not alone. In her perception the teachers appreciate the power of collaborative conversations. The converstaions allow them to set teacher-created goals and action plans to achieve those goals. These conversations happen daily and are expected as part of the team. Another important aspect of collaborative teams is in building leadership capacity. Tami said, "Through their collaborative work, they are building leaders." Collaborative teams allow teachers to become more knowledageble because of the focus on student achievement and teacher improvement.

Matt discussed the importance of collaboration in PLCs, highlighting that it is not always easy for teams to become collaborative. Matt said:

> Collaboration is invaluable. If you can get everybody on the same page and with the same mindset, that's it. You have to get to a point in the collaboration that is a total team effort. Not just all being on the same page, but all working towards the same goal.

Matt believes in the importance of working with teachers in collaborative teams. He found that new teachers bring fresh ideas to veteran teachers and veteran teachers have a wealth of experiences to help new teachers.

Jason spoke of collaboration changing teachers' lives. He gave a specific example about a new teacher working in a PLC team of veteran teachers. Jason said:

> We had two new science teachers who had never taught science before. I have a new social studies teacher who had not taught the grade they are teaching this year. Working with their teams has allowed them to understand our school, their new content and standards, and teaching strategies that have worked in the past. The collaboration will enable us to help limit a new teacher's learning curve.

Tim discussed the ability of teachers to have daily conversations focused on student success and teaching strategies because of collaboration. In his view PLCs allow teachers focus on all aspects of teacher work and enables the exchange of ideas through communication. Tim said, “That is the most important part of PLCs for me. Teachers no longer work alone. They regularly collaborate and open dialogue about teaching, what works, and what does not work.” Tim shared has always strived to be a lifelong learner and believes that if teachers expect students to learn, they should also be willing to learn. He stated, “when teachers work together to get better, they are lifelong learners.” The continual pursuit of learning is an important aspect of PLCs for Tim.

Eric said the teachers in his building changed during his tenure, noting, “When I first got here, people wanted to work in isolation, even administrators, I have had to change their mindsets.” He believes there has been a profound change in the collaborative practices of his staff, because they have bought-in and see the value in working together.

He believes the hesitatncy at first was because, “I think they were afraid of too many voices being together.” Through work in their PLCs his teachers are now able to freely communicate and, “They are not afraid to ask each other why. Why did something work, or why did what you do work and what I did not work.” Now teachers thrive on helping others and receiving help from others.

Educators working together in collaboration is the core of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2016). Each of the participants in this study highlighted collaboration as a critical component of successful PLCs. Some of their reasons were different, they all aligned with what Owen (2016) called “shared and advanced practice.” All six principal participants agreed that collaboration makes their schools better.

***Collective Responsibility***

Williams and Hierk (2015) stated, “collective responsibility is necessary for a PLC to be successful” (p. 9). Collective responsibility happens when collaborative teams of teachers work together to achieve the same goals (Williams & Hierk, 2015). Effective PLC teams work together and hold each other responsible for the successes and failures of the PLC team. Each participant indicated the importance of collective responsibility regarding their collaborative teams. When discussing teacher's understanding and acceptance of the challenges to help students, Matt stated, “We are all here for the same reasons. To reach growth, we need to be a successful school. It takes each student growing. And for that to happen, it takes a collective effort.” Matt urges his teachers to work together in their PLCs, help each other improve, and share ideas because “we are all in it together” in the end.

Eric shared how teachers in PLCs are often working together and checking in on

each other. He said, “Teachers monitor each other to make sure they’re being successful. When teachers have tough times, they have each others’ backs.” Beyond individual PLCs, Eric implemented a school-wide goal this year to be at or above the state average in every category on CCRPI. According to him, this jumpstarted collective responsibility for the year. He said, “All of a sudden, you have teachers who teach entirely different subjects asking how others are doing. They are sharing teaching and classroom management strategies.” In his view, this is because his teachers are trying to meet the school-wide goal together.

Jason has experienced both sides of collective responsibility during his career. He has worked in buildings where teachers operated in isolation with no collective responsibility and in buildings where teachers were wholly committed to each other. In the buildings without collective responsibility, Jason stated, “In those schools, everyone wanted to be the shining light, and they wanted to have the best scores. The competitive nature of the teachers would come out in the end.” Those schools did not function as effective PLCs. The most productive teachers he has worked with always “worked together for one common cause.” In Jason’s perception, collective responsibility is when “Teachers are at their finest when they know as one succeeds they all succeed, and as one fails they all fail.” Jason has experienced different PLC dynamics but believes PLCs can only be effective when the teachers hold each other responsible.

Tim, like Jason, has also experienced PLC teams with no collective responsibility and PLC teams who were responsible to each other. When Tim first began the PLC process, he worked with an entire group of singletons (the only teacher of a subject) and, as a result, had difficulty getting content teachers to participate in the collective

responsibility process. If a student in one subject failed, teachers struggled to see how that related to their subject. However, as the PLC processes in Tim's building have continued to grow, even singletons have started to believe they are all responsible for all students. He said:

> Students deserve the best, and the purpose of PLCs is to improve the practice of teaching. If you have solid instruction, then student achievement is going to rise. There are a lot of things we can't control. The instructional environment we can control. Our teachers implement strategies that work, strategies they can manage, and then break down the data to determine where our students succeed. If a certain subgroup of students doesn't succeed, all of our teachers want to know why; not just the content teacher.

As a result of this collective responsibility, Tim has seen "a dramatic improvement in instructional practices." From the beginning of his tenure, Tim took responsibility for the building's instructional practices. He believes this has helped his PLCs take responsibility for their practices and student achievement within their PLC.

Tami believes the only way for PLCs to be effective is to operate with a spirit of responsibility amongst members. In her perception, this is especially true of student achievement. She said:

> When you see the growth of students, it is always tied to the development of teacher conversations. Conversations start as planning and goal-setting. After the instruction, it turns to data-tracking and critical conversations. Data [do not] lie, and when kids fail, the PLC is responsible; not one teacher, but all teachers.

Tami said collective responsibility amongst PLC members took time to build. "It took

some time to develop, and we still have some improvements to make, but we're constantly working towards it." Once Tami's teachers understood the process of PLCs and built trust, they were able to move past any finger-pointing and work effectively as a group.

Lyla used the phrase "shared responsibility" when asked what her definition of a PLC is. In her opinion, this is invaluable because it allows teachers to overcome their weaknesses by building on the strength of others. She said, "Even the strongest departments have weak links, but when they share responsibility for student success, the weaknesses tend to disappear." This happens because of the work of collaborative teams. She has also experienced collaborative teams that decided standards and curriculum together, but when test data were released, shared responsibility disappeared. Lyla discussed developing a culture of collective responsibility by investing in teachers and getting them to invest in each other. "When teachers invest in each other, they transform each other. When you help transform someone, you want them to succeed because you have given an effort to help them." When teachers working together in PLCs hold each other accountable, Lyla said, "This is when teachers in PLCs begin to shared responsibility. It starts as collaboration and trust but evolves into shared responsibility." As such, teachers' roles in the PLC are less important. Someone could be a PLC leader or just a member. However, in Lyla's perception, the PLC is only as strong as its weakest link.

***Continuous Improvement***

In PLCs, "each teacher must use the evidence of student learning to collaborate with colleagues to identify either teaching strengths to share or areas of concern for

which to seek new instructional strategies" (Williams & Hierck, 2015, p. 109). Teachers working in unison to get better is imperative to successful PLCs (Fullan, 1993). Fullan (1993) stated, "you cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without teachers having the same characteristics" (p. 46). In other words, teachers need to do what they expect students to do.

Lyla expects her PLCs to operate with the idea of continuous improvement in mind. She stated, "I expect them to learn one another and know one another, and figure out each other's strengths and weaknesses." She believes that this does not happen quickly but still holds the PLC responsible for it. Lyla stated, "They have to be willing to invest in each other, and that is built on trust. We begin that process by acknowledging we are all content experts." Lyla specifically sees the subtheme of continuous improvement is in PLC data conversations. She emphasized, "One of our primary goals is to make data-driven decisions every year, and sometimes those are hard conversations for teachers." Lyla believes teachers cannot have open and honest conversations about data without trust. "Without trust, teachers feel like they are being judged. With trust, it is only about getting better." When teachers build trust and are willing to collaborate both before and after assessments, continuous improvement can happen. Lyla believes this is when teachers start to learn and improve together.

Eric and Lyla shared a similar belief in continuous improvement being tied to data. Eric, "As a school, we are data-driven and need to show progress. If you are not showing progress, you're not going to be here." This highlights the importance of the mindset of teachers. If you are willing to work and collaborate in your PLCs and, as Eric said, "swallow your ego a little bit," then there is a place for you. Eric indicated, "When

teachers realize it isn't about them, it is about the students, which is when they are no longer afraid to show their data because they know they have the support to get better." Teachers supporting each other and teachers being willing to accept support is the key to continuous improvement. Eric believes continuous improvement ensures students receive the best instruction possible.

Tim's philosophy on education, especially when helping teachers improve, has always been to learn "everything you can about everything you can." For him, this is true for both classroom teachers and leaders he is trying to help grow. He tells them, "When somebody wants to know who can do something, your name needs to be the first name that pops into their head." PLCs have helped Tim with this philosophy. He strives to have a building culture where everyone is consistently working to improve themselves. In his perception, PLCs has helped with this because of the focus on an exchange of ideas by teacher. Tim sees PLCs as lifelong learning. He contended, "The biggest purpose [of PLCs] is to gain new insight and gain new ideas so you can get better. I focus on helping improve the practice of teaching. If you have good teachers, student achievement is going to come."There are several uncontrollable factors in education, but Tim thinks the one constant that can be controlled is teaching. He makes significant efforts to focus on helping teachers improve daily.

Tami was always trying to improve as a teacher and labeled herself "her biggest critic." She has taken that philosophy and tries to impress it on her staff. She said, "When I think of leadership, the success is in the growing of others." Tami does not believe that sitting and getting professional learning works and wants the professional learning in her building to be more active. Tami believes data is at the heart of continuous improvement

because you have to know where you are at and where you need to go. The data analysis that occurs in PLCs allows this to happen. Tami said, “I think some of the training that we provide the teachers now is on how to analyze data. Not everyone knows how to analyze data correctly and effectively.” In her perception, using data effectively begins with taking ownership of it. Once teachers take ownership of their data, they can start to have collaborative conversations to improve. When you make it about the data and students improving, that is when teachers can advance. Tami believed these conversations are the starting point of continuous improvement.

Jason has worked throughout his career to facilitate the improvement of educators. It began with himself and then transitioned to helping others when he moved into teacher support roles. Now, as a building principal, he continues that mission. As a principal, he acknowledges that some teachers are better than others, but his job is to help the struggling ones. He stated, “My teachers work extremely hard. Some of them are better than others, but most of them work their tails off.” In his experience, regardless of whether a teacher is effective or struggling, they all want to be better. Jason said:

> The majority of teachers I have worked with are constantly looking to find new things, get better, and do the best they can. They all want to do better. They all want to feel that what they are doing can be better because the kids deserve it.

Jason does not accept the notion that teaches cannot improve. He believed through PLCs, it is his and other teachers’ responsibility to help less effective teachers.

Matt and his administrative team try to provide as much support as possible to their PLCs. He again noted, “But they have to be the leaders of their PLCs.” Matt’s team focuses on providing sustenance to their PLCs when needed while at the same time not

being domineering. He said, “I have a great curriculum and support staff to help teachers, but the teachers have to take the lead. I have seen when they feel like they are in charge; the collaboration has been like never before.” For Matt, collaboration is the key to continuous improvement. His teachers have been willing to learn and work to improve. He has also seen “a sense of urgency” that has been missing in the past.

**Student Achievement**

In the world of education today, student outcomes are front and center (DuFour et al., 2016; ESSA, 2015). The two groups of people most connected to student outcomes, or student achievement, are teachers and students. One of the primary ways to increase student achievement is to enhance teacher effectiveness (Hattie, 2017). Research has indicated a correlation between teacher improvement and student improvement (Hattie, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). DuFour (1998) created the framework for modern-day PLCs to improve student achievement. The participants in this study shared their perceptions of PLCs and their connectedness to student achievement. Together they highlighted four main areas: 1) Student Growth, 2) Rigor, 3) Common Assessments, and 4) School Improvement.

***Student Growth***

Muhammad (2009) contended PLCs are the only way for schools to accomplish student achievement goals. This idea was also shared through by the participants of this study. Jason said students in his school began to grow and raise their achievement levels. When asked if PLCs help with student achievement, he said, “Absolutely true! It gives the teachers a better understanding of what to teach, how to teach, what resources to use, and how to manage the workload of a teacher.” He believed operational PLCs serves as

both a support group and a learning group for teachers, this helps students. “Teachers work better together than in isolation. They support each other, and they help each other overcome.” When teachers do this, according to Jason, students are the beneficiaries.

According to Matt, PLCs give teachers essential tools they need to help students grow and learn. He attributed teachers working through the PLC processes together with helping the most. When asked about PLCs correlating to increased student achievement, Matt said, “Look at the data.” This is what his PLCs do all the time. Matt said:

The creation of CFAs and CSAs has been a critical component for us. This has given teachers a gauge for what each is doing. It also helps figure out what is working and who needs support. When the teachers collaborate and talk about data, they are talking about student achievement. They are figuring out how best to help students grow and achieve.

Matt indicated the collaborative work and conversations amongst teachers in a PLC are imperative to student achievement.

Tami said, “The power of PLCs is to improve student achievement.” She credited the conversations teachers have in their PLCs with the growth in student achievement. “Teachers become more knowledgeable and focused because of their PLCs. In the PLCs, the focus is always student achievement.” When asked what PLCs do for students, Tami said:

> A PLC, if it is effectively done within a school, builds student learning. Student learning is improved, and student achievement is improved. Through the PLC, students can gain more knowledge because if teachers become more knowledgeable and know how to maximize student learning, then, of course, the student's education increases well.

Tami found PLCs to be the most effective tool in increasing student achievement and believed all schools should implement PLCs.

Eric asserted PLCs help keep teachers focused and give them a goal to work towards. He doesn't believe PLCs can just "want" to improve student achievement. Instead, they have to be intentional. Eric noted, "PLCs must progress monitor student growth at all times. Everything teachers do in the classroom must have a purpose, and that is to find out where students are." When everyone in the PLC knows precisely how students are progressing, Eric contended it makes it easier to plan how to get them to the end goal. Eric's perception is also that PLCs create momentum for teachers. He asserted when teachers know other teachers succeeded, many find it inspirational.

Lyla echoed Eric's thoughts on student achievement and PLCs. She stated that student achievement is better now than before, and "the work of teachers in PLCs trickles down to kids." PLCs can create a collaborative culture for teachers that contributes to their enhancement and a rise in student achievement. Lyla does not believe this would or could happen school-wide without PLCs. While she acknowledged it might happen in small numbers, it would never be the majority without the work of PLCs. She argued, "I think you can have an effective teacher with successful students without it, but you cannot have a majority." Lyla contended as teachers learn, students learn. And stated, "we (teachers and students) are constantly learning and growing together."

Tim said the entire purpose of PLCs was to improve teacher performance so they can help students achieve more. He claimed, "Student achievement is a byproduct of great teaching." As a result, his PLCs have focused on assisting teachers to provide the best education for students. He said the effect PLCs have had on students might be a

byproduct but:

> The student achievement piece is tied back to our improvement in our teachers, the improvement in the quality of our tests, and the teacher's content knowledge. I cannot link student achievement to one particular thing. It is more the awareness of all the teachers and the teachers working together.

According to Tim, student achievement may be an indirect result of PLCs, but that does not make it any less critical because teachers do what they do to help students. Student achievement comes from what teachers are doing in PLCs.

***Rigor***

One of the subthemes participants described during the study was increased rigor because of teacher PLC teams. Rigor is affected by PLCs in teaching standards and learning targets and in creating assessments (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers work together in PLCs to provide students with meaningful learning experiences tied to essential standards and assessed through teacher-created common assessments (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When teachers work together to ensure deep teaching and rigorous assessment, they provide students with high levels of learning (DuFour et al., 2016).

In Lyla's schools' teachers regularly collaborate about what to teach, how to teach it, and how to assess it. Like the other participants in this study, in Lyla's school, teachers use assessments to generate data to ensure students are mastering the standards. Sometimes Lyla's teachers found they were not teaching a standard to the expected level. At other times, they found the assessment was too easy. PLCs work to ensure that rigor is in place. She stated, "We ensure through data our rigor is where we need it to be. We do not want teachers to teach to the test, but they have to be sure they are teaching it

rigorously enough." As such, PLCs can help safeguard schools against grade inflation.

Jason trusted the rigor of his schools increase through teacher collaboration in PLCs. Jason has seen an increase in rigor for curriculum and instruction because of PLCs. Some of the rigor increase is tied to teachers working together, but there is another part to it as well. He said, "Teachers do not want to be left behind. They compare data; they look at each other's data. If [they] do not teach to the same level of rigor as someone else, the data will be far behind [other teachers]." Jason believed PLCs raise expectations for student achievement. He acknowledged that it can be hard to get students to that level, but that PLCs help.

One of the main emphases of the PLCs in Matt's building is the three tiers of instruction. This helps teachers plan lessons that are appropriate and rigorous at each level, and at the same time, it provides students the education they need on the level they need. Matt stated:

> We focus on tier one instruction for each grade level during their regular 90-minute block. We understand that some students need remediation, and we have pull out times to assist tier two and three students. Our teachers work in their PLC to plan the tier one instruction and highlight what students need tier two and three support.

The rigor for tier one, tier two, and tier three are different, according to Matt. However, it is determined by the PLC and is individualized at tier two and three levels.

Eric, Tami, and Tim spoke about rigor in terms of standard alignment. In their PLC teams, teachers work together to ensure they are teaching the same standards to the same level of rigor. Tim said, "We make them put an example of the rigor it would take

to master a specific standard." While the state outlines the standards, Tami's PLCs focus on aligning learning targets and have conversations about strategies to match rigor. Eric mentioned teachers have the autonomy to teach a standard the way they want to, "but they do not have the autonomy to teach it to the rigor they want to." In each of their schools, teachers work with their PLC teams to develop rigor. Tami stated, "It's about the students understanding the standard and the value they need to get to." Furthermore, when teachers examine the data, it can be determined whether the level of rigor was sufficient as the data analyzed in each of their schools is produced by common teacher-created assessments.

***Common Assessments***

Teachers plan common assessments during PLC time to ensure students are evaluated on the same standards and rigor. This is essential for teachers because it gives them a baseline on how to measure student growth (DuFour et al., 2016). According to DuFour et al. (2016), teachers should use two types of assessments, formative and summative. Summative assessments are the end of all assessments that indicate what a student has mastered, and formative assessments are completed along the way to influence teaching (DuFour et al., 2016). During this study, all six participants spoke about how PLC teams in their schools create assessments to generate data. In each case, the data were used to determine what students know and what teachers can do to improve.

Tami defines PLCs as a "Systematic, data-driven, collaborative, consistent, and communicative team of teachers" who work together to improve student learning. In her school, her teachers create assessments in their PLCs to monitor growth of their students.

Tami stated, “PLC conversations are focused on how well students did [on the assessments] and on specific standards or concepts.” In her school, teachers use the data to improve their teaching. Tami admitted it may be difficult to get teachers to accept data that indicate poor results, but when assessments are PLC-created, there should not be an excuse.

Jason’s teachers create common assessments to ensure students receive the same education and opportunities regardless of teacher. He noted that teachers are experts who know the standards intimately. While some classrooms may be different, the standards and the depth of knowledge are the same, he said. Jason added:

> Common assessments are extremely important. Teachers must work together to develop the assessments, or one teacher’s students may be left behind. Common assessments should be teacher-created and not district or admin created. Teachers should start the process of a unit by creating the assessments, and then they know where they have to get students. It allows teachers to make plans to adjust instruction based on the data.

Common assessments allow teachers to make comparisons on the same content school-wide. Jason contended, “Once the data from common assessments are available, PLCs have to ask the question why.” The question why allows PLCs to plan for intervention and acceleration.

Matt has similar experiences to Jason regarding common assessments. Assessments are created by his PLC teams and are shared based on content. Teachers work together to ensure all standards are assessed at a depth of knowledge level the state

requires. Matt stated his students are similar, so each teacher faces the same challenges. He said:

> Our class make-ups for each teacher are very similar. It is for this reason that I believe it is important to have common assessments. When teachers have common questions to gauge mastery from student to student, there is no better tool to assist each other with strategies. If all are mastering specific standards, great, but if one teacher has a tremendously high success rate and the other teacher's students struggle with a particular standard, then that is when PLCs come into play.

Teachers working together to overcome students' struggles is part of the collaborative and collective nature of PLCs. Matt's teachers and students have benefited from assessing students and analyzing the data during PLC time.

Lyla's teachers also use common assessments to measure student mastery. Her teachers come to school during the summer to work on them. This enables her teachers to plan for the entire year. Lyla said, "make adjustments as needed, but have a plan in place." Their focus during this planning is on common standards, common language, and common rigor. Her teachers use the standards and domains provide by the state department of education, as well as the breakdown of the Georgia Milestones Assessment (GMAS). Her teachers not only work with their colleagues, but also collaborate with other school nearby to ensure quality. Lyla appreciates the data from common assessments. She indicated the development and use of common assessments have been advantageous for her teachers. Common assessments also help teachers establish the

goals for the school year. Her team gets together over the summer to plan goals for the next year, and part of the data they review is from common assessments.

When Eric became principal of his school, he quickly discovered his teachers were not "good test writers." He inspected the professional learning provided to the teachers over the past years and noted none of it was on assessment creation. The PLC process has helped improve the ability of teachers to write tests. He said, "No longer are some questions not meaningful or are teachers using different DOK (Depth of Knowledge) levels." Now his teachers work together in PLCs to create common assessments. The DOK levels are the same, and the questions are the same. Beyond the creation of assessments in PLC teams, his teams also compare the data by student, class, teacher, question, standard, and domain. Eric explained, at any time "If too many missed it, they ask why and how teachers might have taught it differently." These converations happen after every set of assessments his teachers give. The conversations are essential for Eric. This is where "the rubber meets the road," and the real work of teachers begins.

Tim has revisited the way assessments are used at his school. He said, "We started from scratch with everything." It was not just assessments but also the standards and learning targets teachers were teaching. He had his teachers complete essential standards charts that identified every standard and were broken down by learning targets. Within each learning target, the DOK level was highlighted. These charts also outlined how the standards and learning targets were going to be assessed. His teachers also "talk to the grade level above and below them" so teachers and students have a vertical alignment piece. For Tim, assessments are the compass for instruction. He said, "If none of the students are passing, the assessment is too hard, or the teacher didn't teach well enough.

If everyone is passing, it is either too easy, or your teachers knocked it out of the park." The critical part is the teachers complete all of the steps together in their PLC. This gives them ownership of the assessment and, as a result, the data.

### *School Improvement*

Principals are constantly working to improve their schools. In Georgia, educators complete a school improvement plan every summer to help them set goals for the following year. Part of these plans includes action steps needed to accomplish each goal. PLCs provide the engine to complete these goals. PLCs can create school improvement, and when schools advance, student achievement improves (DuFour et al., 2016). School improvement, while managed by the principal, is driven by the teacher (Hesbol, 2019). The six study participants discussed the extent to which PLCs improve teachers and students, and thus the school.

One of the best parts about PLCs for Eric is the open conversations. "When I hear my teachers sharing ideas and being able to have conversations that are open and vulnerable, that is the best." Eric labeled the work of PLCs as "school improvement planning year-round" and noted, "Everything they do helps improve the school." While he admitted he has never explicitly heard his teachers address "school improvement" during PLC-time, he contended that the daily work is consistently about school improvement. He stated, "They are constantly working to better themselves and raise student achievement" and wondered how that would not be considered school improvement.

Jason agreed with Eric. He also noted "school improvement" is never on the PLC team's agenda, but it is always an unspoken focus because school improvement means

teacher and student improvement. Jason reasoned school improvement "is the basis of PLCs. To improve teaching and learning. Without PLCs, it is extremely hard to improve teaching and learning because teachers and schools become stagnate. They just recycle old material." According to Jason, when teachers come together in PLCs to collaborate, share ideas, and make collective decisions, the school community often improves. "More kids are reached, and teachers become more successful." He stated the more people involved in collaboration, the more significant the improvement for the school.

Tami indicated PLCs help schools improve because of the work teachers do and the effect PLCs have on teachers. "If teachers in my building were not involved in a PLC, they would not be as effective as they are." PLCs allow teachers to share their expertise with other teachers, and when teachers share, students often benefit. She noted that for this to happen, "PLCs must be effective" and that "PLCs cannot be effective without administrator support and guidance." Tami is currently satisfied with the status of PLCs in her building because she has seen continuous growth and development. Teachers growing and improving is central to school improvement.

Lyla acknowledged the impact of PLCs on school improvement in the capacity building of the staff. According to Lyla, school improvement is centered on the idea that everyone wants to get better and PLCs "Create a sense of pride in our community. They create hope because teachers rely on one another." PLCs help strengthen individual teachers and, as a result, teams of teachers. Once teams of teachers improve, they work to help other teachers, and the school improves. Lyla stated, "Central to PLCs is the idea everyone can do better; the entire school." Lyla stated, "It is all based on the relationship among colleagues and among students." When that premise is accepted, schools can

make gains in myriad areas.

Tim has experienced a “dramatic improvement in our instructional practices” because of PLCs. He has never explicitly scheduled a professional learning session on instruction but noted that teachers have improved instruction through PLCs. The PLC teams in his building have created essential standards charts for standards, common language, common learning targets, DOK levels for all standards and elements, examples of acceptable rigor, and common assessments. This has improved teaching practices and strategies throughout the building and resulted in the improvement of student mastery. Tim stated that he believed student achievement has increased because teachers have developed better practices.

When asked how PLCs have helped his school and school improvement, Matt indicated teachers working together in collaboration and creating shared goals. He said: When you have good teachers and support staff willing to work towards common goals centered on student achievement, school improvement takes care of itself. PLC’s have helped the school; the camaraderie and sense of team have never been more fantastic for me as a principal.

Matt indicated he stresses the school's vision to ensure that it is always at the forefront. Then, his focus is on supporting the teachers and staff in his building. He contended PLCs, helped establish a positive working atmosphere. “My teachers enjoy working together. Not one of them is selfish. They do not care who gets the credit”. Matt appreciates that his teachers care deeply about growing and helping the students and the school.

## Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings of the study. The study involved six participants, document analysis, and observations. Each participant was interviewed multiple times. The data collected communicated the life, career, and PLC-related experiences of each participant. Each participant in this study is a current middle school principal who has experience with PLCs. The participants' current schools all use PLCs as a means to improve instructional practices and student outcomes. The six participants are from different districts across south Georgia. The participants shared similar experiences, however working in different school systems with varying resources influenced their experiences.

Four overarching themes emerged through an examination of the data. Those four themes were: 1) PLC Processes, 2) Capacity within Schools, 3) School Culture, and 4) Student Achievement. Subthemes were also developed for each overarching theme during data analysis. Together, these findings connected the experiences of each participant and the body of existing literature. The researcher will discuss the conclusions and implications of these findings in Chapter VI.

# Chapter VI

## Discussion and Conclusion

Over the last 38 years, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (United States, 1983), standardized testing has become the norm (Cordogan, 2015). During that time, high stakes testing has become part of yearly activities in the American educational system because educational leaders and politicians have focused on accountability for schools, teachers, and students (Cordogan, 2015; Giordano, 2005). Three major educational reforms have taken place since 1983: No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). One of the primary goals of each was to increase student achievement as measured by high stakes testing. NCLB focused on closing achievement gaps and providing an equitable education for all students (Nichols et al., 2015). RTTT directed states to initiate reforms in four major areas: standards and assessments, data systems to measure growth, teacher retention and rewards, and turnaround schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). ESSA replaced NCLB and reduced the number of high stakes tests (Klein, 2016). ESSA was still centered around high stakes testing results, focusing on the performance of student subgroups, state assessments, graduation rates, and student growth (Jones, 2018). However, the connection between high stakes testing and improved student achievement is questionable (Amrein & Berliner, 2003b; Braun, 2004; Furuta et al., 2016; Katsiyannis et al., 2007; Marchant et al., 2006; Nichols et al., 2005; Smith, 2016; Wong et al., 2016). Nonetheless, administrators and teachers still have to implement effective practices to increase student achievement and meet the demands resulting from high stakes testing (DuFour et al., 2016).

In Georgia, student achievement, teacher evaluation systems, and school evaluation scores are directly connected to high stakes testing. The Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS) measures students' achievement through end-of-year or end-of-course exams. Student achievement scores and several teacher-focused and school indicators are reported in each school's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score. Student achievement data currently makes up 30% of teachers' Teacher Keys Evaluation System (TKES) ratings and almost all of a school's CCRPI score (GADOE, 2018b). Even with an abundance of importance placed on high stakes test scores, many schools have struggled to perform well. This is exceptionally substantial in Georgia due to teacher and school evaluations being directly tied to students' performance on these tests. CCRPI reports for 2018 and 2019 indicated south Georgia was underperforming as a whole (GADOE, 2018a; GADOE, 2019b). According to state reports, the state average for middle schools was 76.2 in 2018 and 77.0 in 2019. When examining the middle school CCRPI scores for schools located within south Georgia RESA districts, data indicated 29 out of the 36 fell below the state CCRPI 2018 average (GADOE, 2018a), and 27 of 36 fell below the state's 2019 CCRPI average (GADOE, 2019b). South Georgia RESA middle schools' yearly average in 2018 was 68.99 (GADOE, 2018a), and in 2019 was 71.42 (GADOE, 2019b).

Principals play essential roles during this era of high stakes testing and student accountability, as they are central to identifying and implementing plans to address student achievement. Principals must work to overcome the pressures of high stakes testing to create an increase in student achievement (Cooper, 2018). Principals can help improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness by creating a school-wide culture

conducive to learning and teaching (Cooper, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Student achievement and teacher effectiveness are symbiotic (Hattie, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the professional practice of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) through an examination of the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly participate in and promote PLCs in their schools. Many school districts use PLCs as a means to increase student achievement. Purposeful sampling was used to select six middle school principals in south Georgia for this phenomenological study. Principals chosen were from the specified region of the state, had at least three years experience in administration, and currently lead a building in which PLCs have been functioning for at least three years. Findings from this research addressed the following research questions:

***Question 1***. What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?

***Question 2***. What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?

***Question 3***. What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?

The researcher selected principal participants from six different districts in south Georgia using purposeful sampling for this phenomenological study. Each principal met the following criteria: have at least three years experience in administration at the assistant principal or principal level, currently serve as a building principal in a PLC school, lead a building with PLCs having functioned for at least three years, and be a principal in south Georgia. These considerations ensured a high likelihood participants would have a rich knowledge of the study's central phenomenon. The researcher compared PLC practices for commonalities and dissimilarities by selecting participants who had conjoint and different factors because there is more than one PLC framework. The researcher examined other frameworks to highlight components used by more than one participant and components used by only one. The researcher safeguarded content validity for this study by using multiple data sources to triangulate findings, including interviews, observations, document collection, and researcher memos (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher employed Seidman's (2013) three-interview series approach. COVID19 impacted the original plan for observations; however, the researcher could still observe the school's natural setting and join multiple meetings virtually. PLC-related documents were collected and examined from each participant's school. Memos were written from researcher-generated notes and reflections. Data analysis began immediately after completion of the first interview and was constant until after the final interview. The complete data set went through numerous series of coding and analysis until themes and subthemes emerged. The four themes were 1) PLC Processes, 2) Capacity within Schools, 3) Culture of School, and 4) Student Growth and Achievement. Each of the

overarching themes had multiple subthemes. The theme of PLC Processes included collective inquiry, team learning, and action and experimentation. Capacity within Schools included leadership, accountability, teacher efficacy, and professional growth and learning. The School Culture theme encompassed collaborative teams, collective responsibility, continuous improvement, and a shared vision for subthemes. The final overarching theme, student achievement, comprised growth and achievement, rigor, common assessment, and school improvement as subthemes. Chapter V contains the findings from this study. In this chapter, I review and discuss each theme and subtheme related to the research questions and the study's limitations, the study's implications, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.

## Research Questions: Summary Discussion

In this qualitative study, the researcher explored the lived experiences of six middle school principals in south Georgia. In this study, the researcher focused on the life, career, and PLC-related experiences and perceptions of middle school principals. Each participant was selected because of their meaningful knowledge of school administration and PLCs. Each participants' story provided essential details about the phenomenon central to the study. I analyzed all participant data concurrently throughout the process using field notes, transcriptions, documents, memos, open coding, and axial coding. The researcher will answer the research questions that guided the study and discuss how they align with the literature and significant themes.

### *Research Question 1*

**Research Question 1: What are the life experiences, career experiences, and Professional Learning Community-related experiences of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly promote Professional Learning Communities in their schools?**

The participants were able to crystalize the story of their life experiences, career experiences, and PLC-related experiences. The participants recollected their contextual experiences commencing with their formative educational years and upbringing, progressing through their college years, the beginning of their professional careers, and culminating with their current status as a building principal. The participants were able to illustrate their recollections of their lived experiences required to answer RQ1. All of the themes and sub-themes compromise some cognizance of each participant's lived experiences. Seidman's (2013) three-interview series uncovered essential aspects of the participants' lives.

Participants shared similar upbringings with few differences. Only one participant, Jason, was born into a family wherein the parents were not married. The other five participants had parents who were married when they were born, and only Tim's got divorced. All participants grew up in south Georgia. Eric and Jason were the only two to grow up in urban areas. Three of the participants' mothers had some level of college education, whereas all six of the participants' fathers never received any education beyond high school. Only one participant, Eric, lived in an area of high socioeconomic status. The rest lived in what they described as areas of low to average socioeconomic status. All but one of the participants described growing up in a household in which

education was emphasized. Jason told a story of his mother working so much she was not home enough to stress the importance of education.

When examining educational experiences as a K-12 student, participants described their experiences with their teachers and their classroom performance. Matt described himself as a low-performing student, but the five other participants defined themselves as average to high-performing students. All six participants told stories of how they had good relationships with teachers during their K-12 academic years, and they also spoke with an affinity for certain teachers who helped mold or shape their lives. Interestingly, every participant said their mother was the person who had the most influence on their education growing up. All six participants have at least an educational specialist degree and two have earned their doctorates.

Participants described their current home life by reviewing their personal lives as adults. Only one of the participants, Tami, is not married. Of the five married participants, Tim, Eric, Matt, and Jason have spouses who earned a collegiate degree. Tim, Eric, Matt, and Jason have children, and all four have two children. Lyla and Tami, both females, have no children. All four of the participants with children described a household in which education was accentuated regularly. Eric is the only participant whose children are old enough to have attended college; his daughter attended and his son did not. Lyla, Eric, and Jason live in urban areas, and Tim, Tami, and Matt live in rural areas.

Participants described their career experiences during the interview process. Lyla, Tim, and Jason were all Math teachers, and Eric and Matt were physical education teachers. Only Tami was not a teacher. She entered the field of education as a counselor. Tami and Jason served in teacher support roles before moving into administration; Tami

as a counselor and Jason as an instructional technology coach. All six participants began their administrative careers as assistant principals. Each participant described their experiences with professional learning as a teacher as below average. However, all six stated their experience with professional learning as an administrator has been high. None of the participants have worked in more than two school systems and Lyla, Tim, and Tami have worked for the same system their entire careers.

The last interview focused on PLCs and participant PLC-related experiences. All participants have experience with PLCs as an administrator, but none practiced PLCs as a teacher or teacher support personnel. Eric and Jason were the first principals to implement PLCs in their schools. Lyla's school system dictates the processes and procedures of PLCs. The other five participants are able to revamp and change PLCs in their building as needed. Lyla and Tim both perceived their teachers to have positive views on PLCs. Eric, Tami, Matt, and Jason perceived their teachers to have average views of PLCs. Each participant perceived their fellow administrators as having positive views on PLCs. All six participants believe PLCs affect teacher effectiveness. When asked about the strengths of the PLCs in their buildings, remarkably, all six participants said collaboration was the strength of their buildings. Matt and Jason said the PLCs' weakness was related to the size of their teaching staff. They each described it as difficult for some teachers to understand the value of working with teachers who do not teach the same content or grade. The other weaknesses included 1) data driving instruction (Lyla), 2) cross-curriculum connections (Tim), 3) formative assessments (Eric), and 4) collective responsibility (Tami). Each participant believes PLCs have a positive effect on student achievement.

The researcher focused on PLCs and the lived experiences of the principal participants throughout their careers in this study. As such, the construct of PLCs and the conceptual framework of this study were interlaced throughout each interview. One of the overarching themes that developed was capacity within schools. This theme was comprised of 1) leadership, 2) accountability, 3) teacher efficacy, and 4) professional growth and learning. This aligns with the literature, as capacity building within schools is imperative to teacher and student learning (Ramirez, 2020).

All participants shared similar attitudes towards leadership and the importance of influential leaders in PLCs. Prior research indicated schools build capacity through solid leaders through PLCs (Clark, 2017; Ramierez, 2020). The belief that strong leaders must exist for PLCs and schools to succeed was shared among all participants. Tami contended effective PLCs are led by principals who dedicate themselves to the PLC process. Jason contended the impact of principals on students is akin to that of teachers; therefore, they must lead the PLC process for it to be successful. Brown et al. (2018) stated the role of a principal was critical. Leadership is not only reflective in administrators, according to Matt. He said, “The best thing principals can do is share leadership.” Tim and Eric echoed Matt’s belief in distributed leadership. They both spoke about building leadership capacity within their staff through leadership opportunities and dialogue. Not only does distributed leadership assist principals, but it also fosters trust between stakeholders. Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) found teachers perceive principals as the most crucial element of the PLC. Lyla maintained her county deemed principals must be instructional leaders. She believes PLCs help newer principals overcome the challenges of leading a building. At the same time, participants used different languages and had different lived

experiences, their perceptions of the importance of leadership align with research. Hesbol (2019) found that principals must believe in themselves if they want others to have efficacy.

Accountability was a topic discussed by all participants. They mentioned the accountability pressure on schools, students, administrators, and teachers because of high stakes testing. DuFour et al. (2016) argued PLCs help foster accountability amongst all stakeholders. Teachers are central figures in PLCs because they are driving factors (DuFour et al., 2016). According to participants in this study, PLCs help teachers hold themselves and each other accountable. Matt said, "I have seen my teachers step up their game." He attributed this to teachers examining data within their PLCs and the data being available for all to review. This is a different experience than participants had in the past. All six participants described how teachers worked in isolation before implementing PLCs. Jason and Tim perceive accountability as closely tied to leadership. They both believe leaders must ensure accountability by monitoring the work of PLCs. The phrase Tim used was "inspect what you expect."

The COVID19 pandemic has affected responsibility. According to Tami, some parents and students lowered their expectations since the onset of the pandemic. Tami credited her teacher PLC teams with being able to overcome the obstacles and work together to find solutions. She stated, "Even though it might not have been their fault, they had to be willing to critique themselves." PLCs helped her teachers overcome many challenges that arose due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, whereas Tami's students and their parents may have let their expectations slip, Lyla saw the opposite. She perceived both student and parent expectations being raised during the pandemic because of PLCs

and the work they observe the teachers doing together. She commented about parents watching teachers together working and understanding it is a team effort to help their children.

Teacher efficacy, also known as teacher effectiveness, is another subtheme of capacity within schools. This refers to teachers' belief in themselves to help students improve (Hattie, 2017). Senge (1990) referred to this as personal mastery. Each participant believed PLCs help increase the effectiveness of teachers. Researchers have found collective teacher efficacy is the most critical factor in raising student achievement (Hattie, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). The experiences of the four participants who had been classroom teachers were similar. Many did not feel supported as teachers and thus believed their skills were insufficient to meet the needs of students in the classroom. Each perceived PLCs help teachers overcome daily challenges to become better teachers. Eric recalled two teachers who planned to retire, but the PLC process and culture "helped them believe in themselves again," thus leading them toward persistence in their roles. Tim expressed how PLCs help teachers grow because they are exposed to "new ideas, different teachers, new standards, and different curriculum." Moreover, Lyla stated, "We have teachers who love working in PLCs because it makes them feel enabled and like superior teachers to what they used to be." These perceptions of PLCs and teacher efficacy align with previous research regarding teacher efficacy and student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016; Hattie & Anderman, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Senge et al. (2012) contended personal mastery in schools is a continual process teachers, and students undertake to achieve desired results. As such, as teacher efficacy increases, student achievement will as well (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Another subtheme emerging throughout the interviews was how professional learning has changed during each participant's career. Each participant described the ineffectiveness of professional learning during their time as a teacher or as a teacher support employee. Participant comments such as, “It was not very useful,” “There was no connection to what the kids needed in the classroom,” and “There was no accountability. Nobody followed up after trainings” were continually heard. However, each participant expressed the importance of effective professional learning and the connection they perceived PLCs and professional learning to have. Lyla stated PLCs “allowed us to become less of managers and more of instructional leaders.” Tim asserted, “Before, professional learning was not adaptable. It was what it was. Now, PLCs allow for change at a moment's notice.” Previous researchers have indicated PLCs create job-embedded professional growth to help improve teachers’ practice (DuFour et al., 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Goddard et al., 2004; McBrayer et al., 2018). Fullan (1993) contended, “You cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without teachers having the same characteristics” (p. 46). Antinluoma et al. (2018) suggested PLCs create life-long learning opportunities for teachers. When teachers learn, they become more effective, and more effective teachers can raise student achievement (Hattie, 2017).

### *Research Question 2*

**Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of identified middle school principals in rural south Georgia of the Professional Learning Community process?**

While professional learning and teacher efficacy were subthemes emerging throughout participants’ careers and PLC experiences, several other themes and

subthemes directly related to participants' perceptions of PLCs also developed. There is no uniform model for PLCs; however, the conceptual framework for this study was the DuFour et al. (2016) model. Examining this model in relation to participants' lived experiences, the researcher found both similarities and differences amongst participant responses.

One of the main themes emerging from participants' stories was the importance of PLC processes. The six participants discussed comparable PLC practices contributing to effectiveness. Collective inquiry is when teachers work together to determine what does and does not work (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In a recent study, Gilliam (2020) found collective inquiry was vital to developing teachers' shared practice. Lyla has been the principal of two schools. In one of the schools she led, the teachers immediately supported the implementation of PLCs. In the other school, teachers did not accept the process until they experienced the value of working together to find out what works.

Tami believes the power of collective inquiry is in the data. She said, "Our data drives everything we do and lets us know when something we are doing is not working. These data-driven conversations lead the way." Matt echoed Tami's thoughts on using data to drive instructional decisions. He and his team created common assessments to compare data and determine which instructional strategies and practices are the most beneficial. This was extremely beneficial as new teachers often struggle during their first few years of teaching. In Eric's school, PLC teams help new teachers overcome the challenges of being unique. Eric stated, "The newer teachers do not have the same skill set as veteran teachers." To that end, Eric underscored the importance of PLCs in helping new teachers. Beyond new teachers, Jason believes collective inquiry helps teachers

reveal the most high-impact instructional practices and consistently use them.

Team learning is directly related to collective inquiry. When teachers work together to find out what does and does not work, they learn together. Tim personally experienced this. He stated, “I have seen my teachers gaining new insight and gaining new ideas together.” In PLC terms, this is known as *team learning*. Team learning is when a group of people comes together to learn, get better as individuals, and get better as a whole (Senge, 1990). In schools, team learning occurs when teachers work together to improve the quality of their professional practice. Team learning happens when teachers work towards the same goals (Senge et al., 2012). The participants in this study all had favorable opinions of team learning and believed team learning helped improve their schools. These perceptions align with previous research regarding the positive effects of team learning on schools (Killion & Roy, 2010; Ramierez, 2020; Stevens, 2019). Lyla attributed the rise in student achievement to teachers working together in teams. Team learning still gives teachers the autonomy to use a personal style, but quality expectations stay the same. Matt proffered his teachers displayed great excitement when they applied something they learned in their PLC in the classroom. Eric noticed excitement goes beyond the classroom and permeates the school, helping create a positive culture. He used an example of students growing in his school even amid the COVID19 pandemic. Tami stated, “We put student achievement first, and that drives our teachers to get better and to want to get better.” She perceived her teachers improved as individuals and thus as a team through PLCs.

Participant interviews revealed action and experimentation as another subtheme. Action-orientation and experimentation in PLCs refer to teachers' willingness to take

action and experiment with new concepts and practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). School improvement cannot happen without action and experimentation (DuFour et al., 2016). The process involves teachers working together in PLC teams through open dialogue to determine effective practices and then putting them into action (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers have to be willing to take chances. Tami demands this of her teachers because she stated it was the only way to acquire success. Hord and Sommers (2008) argued authentic learning by teachers only happens through the action and experimentation process because it helps change mindsets. Senge (1990) described this as the process of changing an individual's mental model or mindset. All six participants spoke about teachers overcoming challenges because of their support in PLCs. Lyla believed this was because "They fear failure is not as great" when working together in a team. Teachers work better together when they trust each other, according to Eric. Tim added teachers have to branch out and step out of their rooms to "see the big picture." Action and experimentation can also happen after professional learning opportunities. Matt noted his teachers learned something during a professional development session one day and then implemented it with excitement soon after the session.

School culture emerged from participant stories as a significant theme during interviews. School culture contains the subthemes 1) Shared Vision, 2) Collective Responsibility, 3) Collaborative Teams, and 4) Continuous Improvement. Senge (1990) argued organizations must implement a philosophy dedicated to learning to succeed. DuFour et al. (2016) contended schools cannot have effective PLCs without a culture committed to learning. Teachers must work together to develop a school-wide culture favorable to student and teacher achievement. A vision sets the foundation for the school.

A shared vision is a concept all stakeholders believe the school community seeks to become (Senge et al., 2012). Once a shared vision is established, everyone works towards accomplishing it.

Wines (2019) claimed PLCs cannot genuinely function without a shared vision. Jason experienced the success of PLCs shaping and defining the school's vision. Jason believed PLC-created visions are more powerful because they give a voice to the teachers. Likewise, Eric claimed the only way for schools to reach the overall goal (Vision) they set for themselves is through teacher-led PLC teams. Tami uses the school's vision statement to redirect staff members when they get off track. Matt had different experiences with school vision until recently. When he first became a principal, he experienced teachers and staff pointing fingers and blaming each other. Through the diligent work of Matt and his team in PLCs, together they developed a vision helping to put an end to blaming others. Tim strives to be a life-long learner and expects the same from his staff. He stated, "I want everyone to learn as much as they can." This applies to both students and teachers. The focus of his PLCs is to reach the vision of becoming a learning school at all times. Lyla had the only significant difference among the participants. Her school's vision is developed and dictated by the central office and not by those in her building. While they do not create it, she stated it still provides direction. "They know what is expected and where we are trying to get to," she said. A shared vision allows people to work together in collaborative teams to achieve results (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2012).

A shared vision is developed in collaborative teams. Collaborative teams was another subtheme devolving from participants' stories and experiences. Marzano et al.

(2016) argued collaborative teams are the most significant characteristic of PLCs. Research has found collaborative teams help students learn and allow teachers to overcome challenges (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Wines, 2019). When asked to define PLCs, Lyla communicated the importance of collaborative teams. She stated, " Collaboration and teamwork collaboration is the bedrock of PLCs." Tim added, "[Collaborative teams] is the most important part of PLCs for me. Teachers no longer work alone. They regularly collaborate and open dialogue about teaching, what works, and what does not work." Tami believed the strength of PLCs is in the empowerment collaborative team members feel because they are never alone. Matt connected it back to goal setting and goal accomplishment, stating, teachers must "all be working towards the same goal." Jason described the ability of collaborative teams to help new teachers defeat the learning curve they experience, and Eric stated collaborative teams help teachers thrive.

Another subtheme of school culture was continuous improvement. In PLCs, continuous improvement is when "each teacher must use the evidence of student learning to collaborate with colleagues to identify either teaching strengths to share or areas of concern for which to seek new instructional strategies" (Williams & Hierck, 2015, p. 109). Continuous improvement is done through collaborative teams and is critical for job-embedded professional growth (Killion & Roy, 2010). Hord and Sommers (2008) believed continuous improvement allowed teachers to learn on the job without ever leaving the school. Each of the six participants in this study spoke about their teachers working to improve regularly and the struggles of offsite professional development. The participants all have experienced offsite professional learning that was not relevant to, active, or practiced by members of the school community.

On the contrary, participants have all experienced teachers obtaining valuable learning experiences through their work in PLCs. Tim, as with collaboration, described continuous improvement as one of the significant purposes of PLCs. In Lyla's building, continuous improvement is an expectation. She expects her staff to trust each other, get to know each other, and learn from one another. She believes they should work to overcome each other's weaknesses. Eric does not "mandate" continuous improvement, but stated, "If you aren't improving, you won't be here." He believes the system his school has implemented helps teachers achieve. Eric's school uses data to guide the conversation. If a teacher's data is lagging, the PLC works together to help teachers overcome it. This continuous improvement, according to Eric, "ensures students receive the best instruction possible." Jason agreed with Eric, noting teachers work hard to be successful. And Matt said, "My teachers have been willing to work and improve in their PLCs." Tami said, "Teachers can learn what they need and what interests them." PLCs help teachers progress, according to Tami, but she appreciates the personalization of the learning in PLCs.

***Research Question 3***

**Research Question 3: What processes do identified middle school principals who regularly participate in Professional Learning Communities in rural south Georgia find most effective?**

The conceptual framework for this study was a combination of two existing concepts: Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLCs. These two concepts lay the foundation for improvement in teachers and students. The center of the conceptual framework (Figure 1.) was student achievement. The conceptual

framework grounded the study and guided the researcher in examining the intersection of these two concepts in addressing student achievement. Research question three guided the researcher in clarifying the stated perceptions of the six participants. When speaking with participants about the processes they found most effective, the overarching theme to develop was Student Achievement. This central theme contained the following subthemes: 1) Student Growth, 2) Rigor, 3) Common Assessments, and 4) School Improvement. Student achievement, also known as student outcomes, is at the forefront of education today (DuFour et al., 2016; ESSA, 2015). It was exciting to see student achievement at the center of the participant's focus.

The first subtheme of Student Achievement was Student Growth. Student growth, for this purpose, is defined as the ability of teachers to help students learn and grow. Each participant spoke about PLCs' ability to help students grow and achieve at higher rates. Tim contended the whole purpose of PLCs was to help teachers improve to improve student achievement. Tami was convinced PLCs help students, "The power of PLCs is to improve student achievement." Her perception is students are the beneficiaries of teachers' work in PLCs. Jason believed student outcomes in his building rose as a result of the implementation of PLCs. Matt agreed, stating, "Look at the data" when asked about PLCs helping raise student achievement. He said, "Our teachers work in collaboration in their PLCs, and through back and forth conversation, they figure out how to best support our students." Eric believes teachers' conversations in their PLCs lead to "intentional practices, where everything has a purpose." He credited teachers giving meaning to their work and being intentional as a catalyst for improved student outcomes. Lyla identified PLCs as creating school-wide improvement for students, not just in small

school sections. She acknowledged students improved before PLCs, but it happened in only a fraction of the classrooms. Since the implementation of PLCs, student scores have risen school-wide. The participants of this study fully believe PLCs help students grow and learn at greater rates. Two subthemes emerged when discussing student achievement that correlate to student growth, rigor and assessment.

The participants discussed the rigor of students' work and the instructional practices teachers engaged with students as a by-product of PLCs. PLCs bring teachers together to provide students with meaningful learning experiences through improved instructional practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). One of the ways teachers work to improve teaching is to increase the rigor of instruction and practice. PLCs support this because teachers collaborate to ensure the rigor of standards, targets, and assessments are at or above expected levels (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers' collaborative work and conversations in their PLCs have helped align standards, learning targets, and the level of rigor expected in Eric, Tami, and Tim's schools. Eric praises teachers' autonomy in PLCs to teach according to their preferred teaching style. He is, though, unwilling to give autonomy regarding the level of rigor with which they teach the standards, as those are PLC-driven. Tim's PLCs completed essential standards charts and part of the charts contained an example of the rigor of each standard. Tami's PLCs deconstructed state standards and had intentional conversations about meeting the rigor of the standards. Lyla's perceived PLCs help teachers ensure their instruction and assessments meet or exceed the rigor of the standards being taught. She credited PLCs with assisting teachers to collaborate to ensure the rigor was at the expected level content-wide. Jason stated his teachers work together to create assessments and review assessment data. In his

perception, PLCs create an instrument for teachers to work together to increase the rigor and take risks, even when their students struggle. He stated, “Teachers do it together, so if students struggle with increased rigor, teachers go back to the drawing board.” According to Matt, this is one way in which PLCs help with both tier-one and tier-two instruction. Tier one instruction is the daily instruction received by all students. Tier two instruction is remedial instruction provided to students based upon formative assessment data. At their basic level, he maintained PLCs help with tier-one instruction because of teachers' collaborative work. As tier-one instruction improves through increased rigor at a deeper level, tier-two teaching becomes imperative. He stated, “When you increase the rigor of what is expected, some students are not going to get it. Our teacher PLCs teams plan with this in mind. They already have tier-two instructional plans ready to help students meet that rigor.” When considering rigor, each participant underscored the importance of data and comparing teacher data when examining rigor.

One of the crucial pieces of work teachers do in PLCs is to analyze student data from assessments (DuFour et al., 2016). Much of this assessment data comes from PLC-generated common assessments. The participants in this study highlighted the importance of common assessments in comparing data and ensuring students are learning and achieving at school-determined levels. Richard DuFour (DuFour, nd, Timestamp 0:16) stated, “A common assessment is just what it sounds like. Students who are in the same curriculum and who are expected to acquire the same knowledge, when it’s time to assess that knowledge, we will use the same assessment.” Jason’s definition of a common assessment was similar, asserting classrooms can be different, but standards are the same, so assessments should be the same. Common assessments are essential for PLCs because

data from different assessments is difficult to compare, so PLCs generate common assessments. Common assessments provide the data needed to ensure students are learning (DuFour et al., 2016). Common assessments comprise two different formats. Formative assessments are used to direct the teaching and learning process, and summative assessments determine what students have learned (DuFor et al., 2015). Each helps ensure students are achieving and assists educators in identifying areas of weakness. Data from common assessments drive a myriad of conversations in Tami and Lyla's schools. Teachers frequently discuss what to assess, the rigor needed to assess it, and compare data to determine where students struggled and potential reasons why. These discussions happen regularly to drive and modify instruction throughout the year and are used to plan goals for the following school year. Matt offered one substantial value in using PLC-created common assessments is allowing teachers to collectively determine why a specific group of students mastered a standard and another group of students did not. If teachers note a difference, PLC teams examine how teachers taught differently, attendance rates, or other reasons causing a difference in student data. Tim used the same process as Matt and contended if most students are not passing, it may be due to the assessment being too rigorous or the teacher's instruction was not effective. Eric believed some teachers are not good test writers, which can skew the data. Teachers creating common assessments in their PLC teams ensure assessments are valid and provide job-embedded learning for teachers on how to improve the creation of assessments. When PLCs create common assessments, whether formative or summative, they are supporting student achievement. Common assessments help ensure rigor is appropriate and student learning is occurring. All participants believed when all components are working

simultaneously, schools improve.

DuFour et al. (2016) identified PLCs as a framework to improve schools. School improvement is an essential component of educators' jobs regardless of whether they are administrators or classroom teachers (Cooper, 2018; Hesbol, 2019; Schmoker, 1999; Vinson, 2018). PLCs can improve schools by improving teacher effectiveness and student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). The participants in this study all perceived PLCs support school improvement. According to Jason and Eric, this improvement is rooted in the continual conversations teachers have in their PLCs. They both spoke about school improvement being at the forefront of teachers' work in their PLCs. Jason indicated while it might not be written explicitly on the agenda, it is always a focus. Moreover, Eric concluded PLCs provide "school-improvement planning" every time they meet. In Tami's view, school improvement is a by-product of PLCs and student achievement. She stated, "As our teachers improved, student achievement went up. When student achievement rises, school improvement rises." Lyla had a comparable perception. She believed the positive impact PLCs have on school improvement is because of the constant advancement of teachers and teacher teams. The instructional improvement of Tim's teachers has led to an enhancement in the educational practices used in his building. Matt's PLCs have created common goals for his teachers. "Goals are always centered around student achievement," so school improvement "takes care of itself." He believes his staff's willingness to work towards accomplishing those goals has improved student achievement.

## Limitations of the Study

Identifying the limitations of a particular study can help achieve credibility

(Patton, 2015). Limitations can influence the implications and recommendations of the study (Patton, 2015). Upon reviewing the study and methodology, I identified three primary limitations: 1) generalizability, 2) COVID19, and 3) researcher bias and reactivity. Merriam (2002) indicated it is the researcher's job to identify the possible limitations, but that readers determine the application.

### *Generalizability*

The researcher utilized purposeful selection for this study because of the obligation to find participants suitable to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). As a result, the study was small, using six current middle school principals from south Georgia with at least three years of experience. Each participant had to be the principal of a school with operational PLCs. The participants were made up of four males and two females. The racial makeup of the participants consisted of two Black participants and four White participants. All participants were current middle school principals with varying backgrounds as identified in Chapter IV. Generalizability refers to the ability to "expand research results, conclusions, or other accounts" of one group of individuals, to another (Maxwell, 2013, p. 136). Based on the small sample size, the generalizability of the study may be limited.

The study was limited to participants located within the RESA districts of rural south Georgia. It cannot be presumed that the six participants in this study represent all middle school principals. School characteristics such as size, location, the economy of community, and student population are all variables that could change generalization. Because each of the participant's schools was at different stages in their timeline of using PLCs, findings may not be characteristic of all schools implementing PLCs.

### *COVID19*

During this study, the residents of the United States lived through a continuing COVID19 pandemic. COVID19 created limitations during the study with participants' availability and admittance to school sites. COVID19 vaccinations had been developed, but at the time of interviews were only available to specific segments of the population. All of the participant's schools were operating under modified visitor access, so observations had to be completed at a distance or virtually. Access to participants was also affected. Many participants did not feel comfortable with face-to-face interviews and were worried about their well-being, so interviews were conducted virtually. COVID19 also affected instructional practices in many schools regarding face-to-face instruction and virtual instruction, so teachers and principals were operating in uncharted territory.

### *Researcher Bias and Reactivity*

Qualitative studies rely heavily on the researchers' and participants' experiences and perceptions (Ary et al., 2019). Researcher bias "may result from selective observations, hearing only what one wants to hear, or allowing personal attitudes, preferences, and feelings to affect the interpretation of data" (Ary et al., 2019, p. 444). Reactivity happens when participants of a study act differently or change their views because of the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Thus, I employed Seidman's (2013) three-interview approach and the use of open-ended questions to help offset any reactivity. Seidman (2013) suggested using interview notes and memos by the researcher to create supplemental questions to elicit clarity to overcome any researcher bias or reactivity. I also employed participant accuracy checks by asking them to examine their interview transcripts and provide feedback (Maxwell, 2013). Participant feedback was assumed to

be truthful and allowed me to check for accuracy in my findings and interpretations. Nevertheless, because the study was based on participant perceptions and recalling experiences from memory, I cannot rule out participant inaccuracies. Furthermore, since themes and subthemes were derived from these perceptions and memories, imprecisions may be found within the results.

## Implications of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to explore the professional practice of PLCs by examining the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural south Georgia. The purpose was to explore participants' perceptions of PLCs' effect on student achievement, teachers, and schools. This study provided insight into the experiences middle school principals in south Georgia have regarding PLCs. These experiences and participant perceptions created a potential roadmap for other middle schools to implement PLCs.

Four main themes emerged after data analysis. The four main themes contained 15 subthemes. Together, these themes provided the foundation for the implications of this study. This study was grounded primarily on the PLC framework created by DuFour et al. (2016), but findings may have value for schools operating under different PLC frameworks. The study of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour et al.'s (2016) PLCs and the intersection of the two concepts on student achievement adds to existing literature. The implications from this study can be used to improve student learning and teacher practices.

The participants of this study represented six different schools and districts.

Participants were selected to provide rich information about PLCs because of their experiences as building-level administrators. The implications for schools can be found in the major themes of this study. All four major themes have implications regarding schools: 1) PLC Processes, 2) Capacity within Schools, 3) School Culture, and 4) Student Achievement. Implications from his study may help principals and teachers improve in these significant areas.

The implementation of PLCs can lead to increased capacity within schools. School capacity building is when individuals come together in groups to increase the collective ability to help students learn (Clark, 2017). In this study, the increased capacity was a result of PLCs. PLCs helped increase certain aspects of school capacity: 1) Leadership, 2) Accountability, 3) Teacher Efficacy, and 4) Professional Growth and Learning. When leaders and teachers, through the PLC process, work to build capacity in a school, they bring people together to achieve commonly desired results (Clark, 2017).

The participants in this study believed PLCs improve school culture. School culture is enhanced through 1) Shared Vision, 2) Collaborative Teams, 3) Collective Responsibility, and 4) Continuous Improvement. Senge (1990) believed culture was a substantial factor in learning. PLCs can help change the culture of schools by aiding in the development of a shared vision (Wines, 2019). A shared vision must be created in collaboration with representation from all stakeholders. PLCs can provide the mechanism for this to happen through collaborative teams. Collaborative teams are an essential component of PLCs and positively impact student learning and teacher instruction (Marzano et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Wines, 2019). Once schools operate with high-functioning teams, teachers develop a sense of collective responsibility to hold each

other accountable. Collective responsibility helps collaborative teams meet goals by ensuring all individuals are working to achieve the same goal (Williams & Hierk, 2015). Together, this can lead to continuous improvement, and when progress happens in consistent phases, the school culture can also benefit.

School culture and an increase in capacity within schools happen when effective PLC processes are put in place. Currently, teachers face more challenges than possibly ever before because the world of education is almost entirely focused on student outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016). In Georgia, these outcomes are measured by GMAS and recorded as part of CCRPI. PLCs can help teachers overcome obstacles and hardships by providing processes that help them succeed. A core theme that emerged during this study was PLC Processes and was comprised of three subthemes: 1) Collective Inquiry, 2) Team Learning, and 3) Action and Experimentation. PLCs provide teachers with a framework that focuses on student learning through improved teacher teaching (DuFour et al., 2016). While PLCs frameworks may be different, the three processes identified by participants in this study provide a solid foundation for teachers to meet intended outcomes. Teachers who seek to improve their PLCs, teaching ability, or student outcomes can implement these processes to help create positive results.

The findings from this study have clear implications for students. All six participants perceived PLCs to improve student learning. When I examined the student achievement data on CCRPI for participant schools over the last three years, data shows improvement (GADOE, 2017; GADOE, 2018a; GADOE, 2019b). Three of the participant's schools have shown improvement in two of the last three years, and the other three have shown improvement each of the last three years. In today's educational

world, where student achievement is put first, PLCs provide a framework to meet that challenge (Muhammad, 2009). More students can meet targeted outcomes when teachers work together to ensure students learn. As a result, school-wide student achievement can increase. Teachers can accomplish this by working together in PLCs to ensure the curriculum is being taught and assessed with the appropriate rigor. Teachers work together to develop common assessments to test students and compare data. This data is crucial because it drives the conversations of the PLC and gives teachers a baseline (DuFour et al., 2016). When students master content, they can decide what to teach next. If the majority didn't master it, they know they may have a PLC-wide instruction or rigor issue. Lastly, if a small population didn't pass it, they can examine why. Thus, school improvement is another implication of the study.

Overall, the implications for this study are vast. The framework for PLCs examined in this study offers schools and teachers a means to improve student education. It also provides teachers with methods to enhance their professional practice. When schools implement PLCs under the framework provided in this study, they may improve because they enhance capacity, culture, and student achievement.

## Recommendations

This qualitative study offers new information to the present research on PLCs and student achievement. Six south Georgia middle school principals partook in an exploration of their lived experiences regarding PLCs. The participants' views on PLCs and student achievement were the focus of this study. After carefully reviewing the participants' interview transcripts and the following themes, the researcher recommends the following ideas for further research.

### *Expansion of the Sample Size*

Future studies regarding principal perceptions of PLCs and PLC processes and how PLCs relate to student achievement should employ a larger sample size. This study used six middle school principals from rural south Georgia. The sample size is acceptable for the qualitative methodology used in this study, but an increased sample size would allow for greater generalizability.

### *Expansion of the Sample Parameters*

One parameter used by the researcher in this study was the location of participants. The geographic parameter for this study was rural south Georgia and future researchers should expand these parameters to include areas. Expanding beyond rural south Georgia would allow future scholars to explore principal perceptions of PLCs to allow for greater generalizability and comparative analysis of different regions of the state and beyond.

A second parameter used in this study was the grade levels for which participants were currently principals. The researcher concentrated on middle school principals in rural south Georgia. The limit of middle school principals was appropriate for the focus of this study but limits the generalization of the findings. Future researchers should expand the study to different grade-level schools. Examining principal perceptions for primary, elementary, and high schools may strengthen the conclusions.

The third parameter used in this study was that all participants were principals. I recommend that future researchers expand this parameter to include a broader faculty, staff, parents, and students. Future studies should focus on the perceptions of this increased population to increase generalization and allow for a comparative analysis of

findings between different sub-sections of a school or district's population.

### *Conduct Quantitative or Mixed Methods Studies*

In this study, the researcher applied qualitative methods of research. Future researchers should look to implement quantitative or mixed-method analysis to validate the findings of this qualitative study. Quantitative and mixed methods research would allow for the exploration of cause and effect, correlations to be examined, the introduction of other variables, and better generalization of findings. Future researchers can employ a much larger sample size with quantitative or mixed-method approaches because data management is less cumbersome.

### *Complete Longitudinal Studies*

The interviews for this study were conducted over six months and focused on participants' perceptions and lived experiences. A longitudinal study "gathers information at different points in time in order to study changes over an extended period of time" (Ary et al., 2019, p. 316). Future researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to examine how perceptions and lived experiences of participants change over time.

### *Conduct Cross-Sectional Surveys*

Ary et al. (2019) defined cross-sectional surveys as an examination conducted with different subsections of a population at an identical time. Future researchers should explore how PLC perceptions and lived experiences differ among other groups within a population.

### *Study the Impact of COVID19*

The participants of this study were all middle school administrators during the COVID19 global pandemic. COVID19 has presented unique and monumental challenges

to educators and students (Stanistreet et al., 2020). Future studies should explore the impact of COVID19 on the PLC perceptions and lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, future studies could explore the impact of PLC processes on overcoming the obstacles of COVID19.

## Conclusion

My interest in performing this study was my constant aspiration to discover ways to help teachers and students meet the challenges of raising student achievement in the era of high stakes testing. My experiences with PLCs led me to believe their framework establishes a mechanism for teachers and schools to help students achieve at greater rates. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore PLCs' professional practice by examining the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural south Georgia who regularly participate in, and promote, PLCs in their schools. In a phenomenological study, the researcher aims to better understand and make meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). In this study, I focused on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants to make meaning of PLCs and student achievement through the lens of Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour et al.'s (2016) PLCs framework.

Chapter I provided readers with a description of the continual challenges schools face in raising student achievement. According to GMAS and CCRPI, students and schools in rural south Georgia were underperforming the rest of the state (GADOE, 2018a; GADOE, 2019b). Research has shown increasing collective teacher efficacy or effectiveness can impact student achievement (Hattie, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Barr,

2004). PLCs help increase teacher effectiveness and improve schools (Antinluoma et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Goddard et al., 2004; McBrayer et al., 2018). In Chapter II, the researcher explored prior research and literature on high stakes testing and its history, past and present United States educational law, learning organizations, PLCs, and the role of principals in learning organizations and PLCs. The researcher established the methodology for this phenomenological qualitative study in Chapter III. The researcher also addressed the sampling technique, data collection tools, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, validity, and ethical issues. In Chapter IV, the researcher introduced readers to the six participants of the study through detail-rich representations. In Chapter V, the researcher discussed the procedures for data analysis and the themes that emerged. My conclusion and overall explanations of the findings were presented in Chapter VI. I also presented answers to the study's three research questions, addressed the limitations and implications of the study, and made recommendations for future research. Lastly, I offered my final remarks.

The data collected to answer the study's research questions provided the researcher with a plethora of valuable information. One of the most significant findings of this study was that no two schools operated under the same PLC framework, but all PLCs had the same goals in mind. The six participants in this study all used different frameworks for their PLCs for various reasons: district office initiatives, school size, training provided, and resources available. However, the continued work to increase achievement and improve schools was constant. The participants in this study may have used different PLC structures, processes, or language, but their focus was consistent.

All of the participants in the study believed PLCs provide a systematic approach

to help teachers help students. Yet, these participants were not just focused on students alone. Instead, they had a desire to help teachers grow. Each discussed the difficulties teachers endure today and their belief that PLCs can help teachers overcome these challenges. The collaborative work teachers complete through the PLC process is invaluable and allows them to learn from each other. While the PLC frameworks may have had different characteristics, the learning structure through collaborative teams existed in each participant's school. They used goals as roadmaps for where they wanted to go and compared student data as benchmarks.

Another interesting facet presented in the study was different timelines of PLC implementation did not appear to affect participant perceptions. While each principal had a different history with PLC implementation and longevity, they all had favorable perceptions of PLCs. In some participants' schools, PLCs were a district initiative, and in others, the principal implemented them. Some participants had to revamp the PLC framework and processes utilized in their schools. However, each participant had positive perceptions of PLCs.

Lastly, the biggest takeaway I gained from this study was the importance of being a life-long learner. When analyzing the data from each participant, the word "learning" was the most utilized word by participants. Participants mentioned learning in different formats and by different stakeholders, such as individuals, teams, students, staff, school, and the participants themselves. In each participant's experience, PLCs provided a framework for the entirety of the school to continually learn and improve. Teachers can learn from each other and expand their professional practices. Moreover, in schools with PLCs, because teachers work together to provide optimal educational experiences for

students, the education students receive is more equitable, regardless of their teacher. Thus, PLCs in these schools provided an endless cycle of learning.

School principals looking to improve their student achievement and teacher practices should look to PLCs to help. Interested school leaders should look to the frameworks provided by Senge's (1990) learning organizations and DuFour et al.'s (2016) PLCs. The perceptions and lived experiences of the principals examined in this study provide background knowledge that could be helpful. Furthermore, CCRPI data for the last three years back up the participants' perceptions. There are different frameworks for PLCs, but school administrators would do well to examine the findings of this study for solutions to help with student achievement. The participants of this study used different languages to discuss the same concept or theme. In this study, I have outlined participant-generated themes and subthemes that would benefit all schools.

Principals and districts should incorporate PLCs as a tool to overcome the challenges of student achievement. PLCs help improve the capacity within schools, including the climate and culture. A favorable climate and culture helps increase the effectiveness and mood of teachers. PLCs provide teachers with consistent job-embedded professional growth opportunities that would otherwise not be available. PLCs help teachers work together, create a common language, and develop a shared vision and goals. When teachers work together under the same guiding principles, students are the beneficiaries.

Schools should also implement PLCs because of their effect on students and school improvement. Teachers working together through PLCs are more likely to see higher gains in student achievement because of the PLC processes and teacher teamwork.

PLCs create an atmosphere that allows teachers to collaborate and take risks. They are supported by their colleagues and know they succeed together. PLCs are also conducive to increased student achievement because of the processes they incorporate. These include common assessments, data analysis, collective inquiry, and collaboration. Teachers plan and use common assessments to gauge the mastery level of students. The teacher-led PLC then analyzes the data to ensure all students mastered the necessary standards. Teachers work together through collective inquiry to figure out why when they do not. This collaboration on common assessments is one of the most beneficial components of PLCs.

The participants in this study provided rich information based on their perceptions and lived experiences of PLCs. The obstacles and challenges educators and students face today is great. The themes and subthemes having emerged through data collection and analysis provide principals, teachers, and schools with a means to overcome those obstacles and challenges. Principals of schools who do not use PLCs should consider implementing PLCs to help teachers and students. Based on the findings of this study and past literature, I find that PLCs positively impact student achievement and are a means for schools to help teachers and students achieve positive outcomes.

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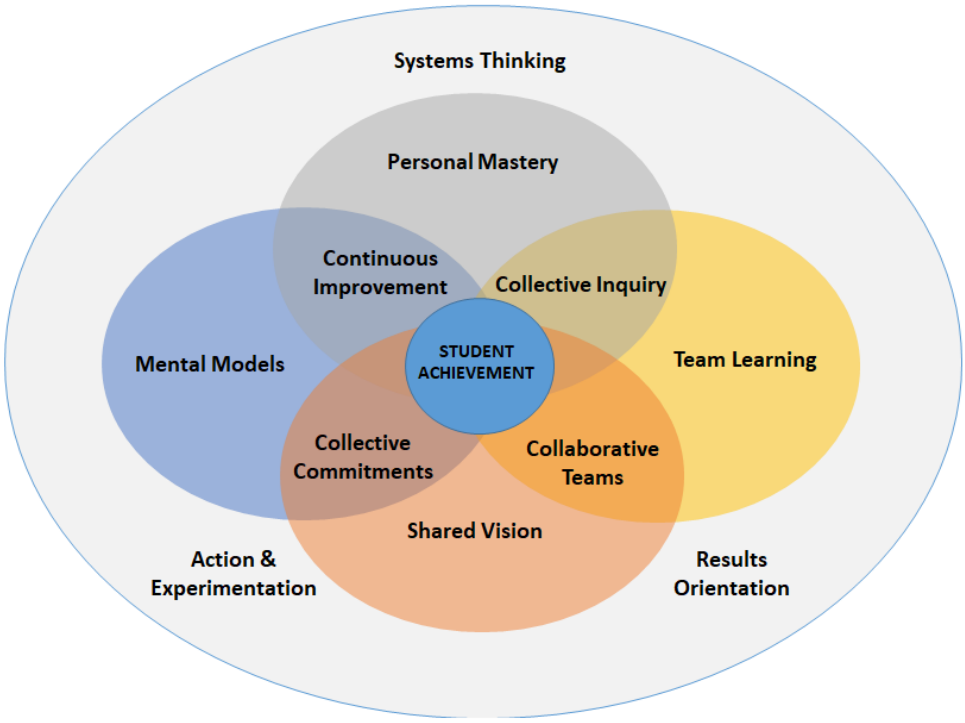
## Appendix A:

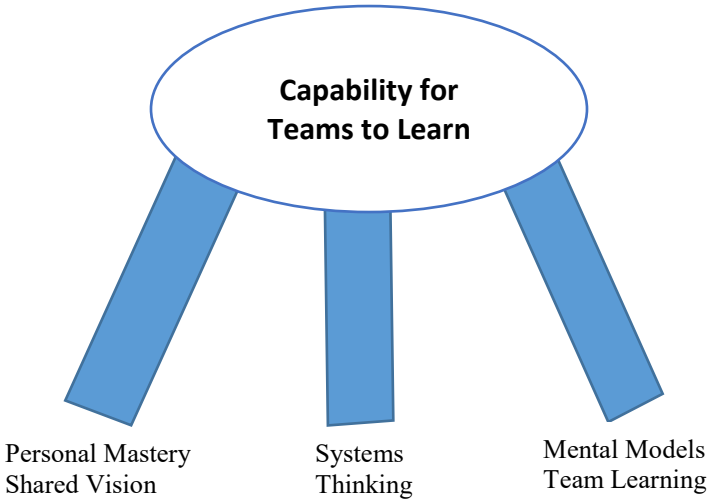
Professional Learning Community Concept Map




*Note*. This concept map illustrates how the various components of Senge's learning organizations and DuFour's professional learning communities interact and create an intersection at student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge, 1990).

## Appendix B:

Three-Legged Stool




Note. Three-Legged-Stool illustrating connections between all the disciplines. Adapted from "Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education by Peter Senge, 2012, p. 74, Copyright 2012 by Crown Business.

## Appendix C:

Shared Vision Continuum

| Telling | Selling | Testing | Consulting | Co-creating |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The left end requires more direction and telling from leaders. The right end requires the decision-making capacity of the schools as a whole.  | | | | |

Note. Starting stages of a shared vision for learning schools. Adapted from "Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education by Peter Senge, 2012, p. 89, Copyright 2012 by Crown Business.

## Appendix D:

Institutional Review Board Approval

***Institutional Review Board (IRB)***
***For the Protection of Human Research Participants***

**PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT**

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**Protocol Number:** 04172-2021 **Responsible Researcher(s):** David Sims

**Supervising Faculty:** Dr. Michael Bochenko

**Project Title:** *Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities.*

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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:**

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2.** Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

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**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

- *Upon completion of the research study collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- *To ensure confidentiality, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists., email addresses, etc.*
- *Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interviews provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from all devices.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant's understanding, and establishing willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- *As a time saving measure only, it is recommended that the researcher answer participant questions, confirm understanding, and establish willingness to participate, prior to the start of recording.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

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*Elizabeth Ann Olphie* *06.22.2021*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

***Thank you for submitting an IRB application.***
***Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.***

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*Revised: 06.02.16*

## Appendix E:

Sample Request to Conduct Research

[redacted] County Schools

[redacted]

Dear. [redacted]

My name is David Sims, and I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Education. I am currently working on my dissertation and am seeking participants for my study. My dissertation committee consists of Dr. Michael Bochenko, Dr. William Truby, Dr. J. Shawn Haralson, and Dr. Lisa Williams.

One of the biggest problems facing American educators is increasing student achievement in the era of accountability. Schools need to find ways to increase student achievement as measured by high-stakes testing. My phenomenological study, titled Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities, seeks to gain an understanding of Professional Learning Communities. I plan to do this by examining the life experiences, career experiences, PLC-related experiences, and perceptions of middle school principals in rural South Georgia who regularly participate in and promote PLCs in their schools.

I am writing you to seek permission to speak with one middle school principal from your school district who uses PLCs within their school building. Interviews will be conducted during the summer months, with the possibility of finishing them in the fall depending on the participant's schedules. I am also seeking permission to observe PLC meetings as needed to understand the participants' process better. At no time will students or student data be used or involved in the study. Valdosta State University has approved my research proposal, and your permission is the final piece of evidence needed to complete the IRB application process.

If you would be willing to allow me to speak with a middle school principal in your district, please write a short Letter of Cooperation and permission so I can include it with my application. I know you are extremely busy, and for your convenience have included a pre-written letter that you may sign and date. Thank you for your help with my study!

Yours in Education,

David M. Sims, Ed.S.

## Appendix F:

Sample District Approval to Conduct Research

Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Administration
Valdosta State University
1500 N. Patterson Street
Valdosta, GA 31698

To Whom It May Concern,

After speaking with and reviewing the information, I give David M. Sims, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University, permission to conduct research for his study titled, "Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities" within the [redacted] County school system.

Thank you,

[redacted] 8/23/21

Signature of Superintendent or Designee Date

## Appendix G:

Letter to Applicants

Dear [Principal's Name],

My name is David M. Sims and I am a current Principal in South Georgia. I am also a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am currently working on my dissertation, in the department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Workforce Development. I am preparing to begin the research phase of this study. My dissertation study, titled "Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities," will take place in six middle schools across South Georgia. To complete this research, I would like to interview and observe six middle school building principals in this region of the state.

I am emailing because you are a middle school principal in South Georgia, and I would like to invite you to participate. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete three interviews sessions with me over the course of three months. These interviews will last approximately 90 minute each. The first interview will be about your life, career, and PLC-related experiences as a principal in rural South Georgia. The second interview will focus on your perceptions of the Professional Learning Community Process. Finally, the third interview will be about the PLC-related processes you find most effective.

Throughout the entire research study, your identity will be confidential and protected. You would have the option to withdraw from participating at any time during the study without consequences. If you are interested in participating, or if you have further questions, please contact me by phone [redacted] or by email [redacted] Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours in Education,
David M. Sims, Ed.S.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **David Sims** at [redacted] This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

## Appendix H:

Interview Protocol

### Interview Questions

***Dissertation Topic***: Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities

### Interview I: Life, Career, and PLC-Related Experiences

**Name: _____ Date: _____**

**Location: _____ Time: _____**

**INTRODUCTION (Approximately 5 Minutes)**

Thank you for agreeing and taking the time out of your schedule to be a participant in my study. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of Professional Learning Communities in rural South Georgia middle schools. Your input into this matter is very important because of your experiences with Professional Learning Communities. The questions will be open-ended and are designed to elicit responses from you to help gain a better understanding of your experiences, current reality, and reflections. Please be as open, honest, and sincere as you can.

Today we will conduct interview number one of a possible three. Each interview will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes and have been designed to protect you and your identity. The purpose of the interview today is to gain an understanding of your Life, Career, and PLC-Related experiences. Again, this interview will last approximately 90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. Once the interview is complete, I will transcribe it from start to finish. Should you wish, you have the right to review the transcript and research-collected materials.

Again thank you for your participation. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study or the interview process? With your permission, may I record this interview so I will be able to transcribe it? Are you ready to begin?

**Life Experiences**

1. I would like to start from the beginning. Please tell me about your childhood.
    a. Growing up, were your parents married?
    b. Do you have any siblings?
    c. Who all lived in your house as a child?
    d. What was the highest education of your household family members?
    e. Parents and siblings profession?
    f. Describe the area you grew up in.
2. Now, I would like to understand your current home life and household make-up.

a. Are you currently married? If yes, what is the current level of education and profession of your spouse?
b. Do you have children? If yes, and beyond K-12 education, what is their highest level of education?
c. Please describe the current area you live in.
d. Describe the role of education in your home for your family.

3. Next, I would like to discuss the educational environment you grew up in.
    a. What was the role of education in your childhood home and upbringing?
    b. What type of school did you attend during your K-12 career? Did you attend public, private, a charter, or were you homeschooled?
    c. How would you describe yourself academically as a K-12 student?
    d. How would you describe your behavior as a K-12 student?
    e. Did you participate in any extra-curricular activities as a K-12 student?
    f. How would you describe your social life as a K-12 student?
    g. During your K-12 education, who was the most influential person in your life in regards to education? Why?
4. Now, I would like to transition to your postsecondary education.
    a. Why did you attend college?
    b. What postsecondary institution did you attend?
    c. Why did you choose that particular college?
    d. What was your major in college?
    e. What was the reason you choose that path?
    f. How would you describe your educational experience in college?

**Career Experiences**

1. At this time I would like to transition to your career experiences.
    a. What positions have you held during your time as an educator? Length of each?
    b. Please describe your experiences in each role.
    c. As a teacher, what professional growth opportunities did you have or were you given?
    d. How long have you been an administrator?
    e. What professional growth opportunities have you had or been given as an administrator?
    f. What made you pursue the change from teacher to administrator?
    g. Explain the differences between the role of teacher and administrator.

**PLC-Related Experiences**

1. Now, I would like to understand the experiences you have had with Professional Learning Communities.
    a. What is a professional learning community (PLC)?
    b. What experiences did you have with PLCs as a teacher?
    c. As a teacher, what did you find to be beneficial about PLCs?
    d. What experiences do you have with PLCs as an administrator?
    e. As an administrator, what have you found to be beneficial about PLCs?
    f. Please explain the PLC process as implemented in your building.

g. How does the PLC process you implement in your building compare to others you have seen?

**WRAP-UP (Approximately 5 Minutes)**

Thank you for participating in this interview today. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I appreciate the willingness you have shown in sharing your life, career, and PLC-related experiences. Once I transcribe the interview, you will have to opportunity to check the transcription for accuracy. At any time, if you have questions, please feel free to call me at 229-947-2127 or email me at dsims@valdosta.edu.

## Interview Questions

***Dissertation Topic***: Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities

**Follow Up Interview: Perceptions & Making Meaning**

**Name: _____ Date: _____**

**Location: _____ Time: _____**

**INTRODUCTION (Approximately 5 Minutes)**

Thank you for agreeing and taking the time out of your schedule to be a participant in my study. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of Professional Learning Communities in rural South Georgia middle schools. Your input into this matter is very important because of your experiences with Professional Learning Communities. The questions will be open-ended and are designed to elicit responses from you to help gain a better understanding of your experiences, current reality, and reflections. Please be as open, honest, and sincere as you can.

Today we will conduct the second interview. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes and have been designed to protect you and your identity. The purpose of the interview today is to gain an understanding of your lived experiences and perceptions of PLCs. Again, this interview will last approximately 90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. Once the interview is complete, I will transcribe it from start to finish. Should you wish, you have the right to review the transcript and research-collected materials.

Again thank you for your participation. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the study or the interview process? With your permission, may I record this interview so I will be able to transcribe it? Are you ready to begin?

**Perceptions & Making Meaning**

1. I want to understand what your thoughts are on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
    a. In your own words, please define what a PLC is and what a PLC is not.
2. As a teacher, what was your perception and experience with PLCS?
3. Tell me about the PLC process in your building.
    a. Please explain the PLC process currently being used in your building.
4. Were you the Principal who implemented PLCs in your building?
    a. If you were not, have you had to make changes?
    b. If you were, talk me through the implementation process.
5. What do the teachers in your building think about PLCs?
    a. What feedback have you received on your school's PLCs?
6. Help me understand the effect PLCs have had on your teachers?
7. Help me gain and understanding of the effect PLCs have had on your students?

8. What would you describe as the strengths of your building's PLCs?
9. What would you describe as the weaknesses of your building's PLCs?
10. In the grand scheme of education, what role do you see PLCs playing?
11. What do PLCs do for teachers? What do PLCs do for students?
12. What do you see is the best part of PLCs?
13. What role do Principals play in PLCs?
14. In your opinion, is there a relationship between PLC implementation and teacher effectiveness and student achievement?

## Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "Principals Lived Experiences and Perceptions on Professional Learning Communities", which is being conducted by David M. Sims, a student in the Department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Workforce Development t Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore and describe the PLC-related experiences and perceptions of Middle School Principals in South Georgia, to explain if and how PLCs affect student achievement and teacher effectiveness, and identify effective PLC-processes. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about Professional Learning Communities in South Georgia. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately five hours over the course of three months. The interviews will be audio and/or video recorded in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to David M. Sims at dsims@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a

university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

## Appendix I:

Informed Consent

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Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to David M. Sims at dsims@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

## Appendix J:

Participant Profiles

| Pseudonym | Age Range | Highest Degree | Total Years in Education | Years of Teaching Experience | Years of Administrator Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Eric** | 50 – 55 | EDS | 31 | 12 | 19 |
| **Jason** | 40 – 45 | EDS | 19 | 6 | 7 |
| **Lyla** | 40 – 45 | EDS | 25 | 10 | 15 |
| **Matt** | 35 – 40 | EDS | 14 | 7 | 7 |
| **Tami** | 45 – 50 | EDD | 25 | 0 | 10 |
| **Tim** | 35 - 40 | EDD | 15 | 11 | 4 |

## Appendix K:

Coding Process

| Attribute Coding | Analytic Memos | Initial Coding | Coding Organization | Axial Coding | Final Review |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Descriptions of participants' backgrounds** | Researcher memos and notes. | In Vivo & open coding. | Codes & themes organized by research question. | Subthemes were reorganized and checked for links. | Final check for discrepancies. |

## Appendix L:

Sample of In Vivo Coding Generated Data

| | PLC Processes | Capacity within Schools | School Culture | Student Achievement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Eric** | "Constant conversation" | "Teachers share leadership." | PLCs 100% increase teacher effectiveness." | "Constantly monitoring student data." |
| **Jason** | "Teachers bring different strategies together to see what works." | "Principals have to set high expectations." | "Our teachers work together." | "Student achievement is a reflection of teacher achievement." |
| **Lyla** | "How are we going to get there together." | "Professional Growth Aspect" | "We are always involved in conversations." | "Teachers share assessments." |
| **Matt** | "Helping students achieve is a total team effort." | "PLCs must be a focus of school leadership." | "Teachers are willing and open to help each other." | "Using data to plan and reteach lessons." |
| **Tami** | "Systematic and data-driven." | "I have seen improvement in practices across the board." | "Our teachers are empowered to make decisions." | "Student achievement is improved through PLCs." |
| **Tim** | "Teachers learn new ideas together." | "The best part is the improved practice of teaching." | A key focus is on communication." | "Our student achievement has increased because of PLCs." |

**Appendix M:**

Open Coding Symbols and Clusters

| Code | Description | Cluster |
|---|---|---|
| **CIN** | Collective Inquiry | PLC Processes |
| **TL** | Team Learning | |
| **AE** | Action & Experimentation | |
| **L** | Leadership | Capacity within Schools |
| **ACC** | Accountability | |
| **TE** | Teacher Efficacy | |
| **PGL** | Professional Growth & Learning | |
| **CT** | Collaborative Teams | School Culture |
| **CR** | Collective Responsibility | |
| **CI** | Continuous Improvement | |
| **SV** | Shared Vision | |
| **SG** | Student Growth | Student Achievement |
| **R** | Rigor | |
| **CA** | Common Assessments | |
| **SI** | School Improvement | |