A Qualitative Study on Improving Instructional Practices and Self-efficacy through
Experiences in Professional Learning Communities as Perceived by Identified School
Teachers in Middle and South Georgia

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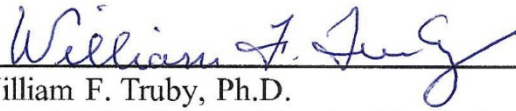
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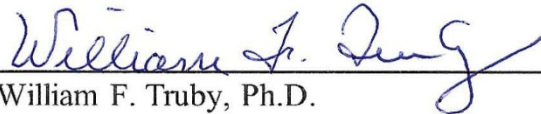Assistant Professor of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development

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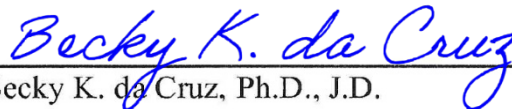Associate Professor of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. The research study employed a basic interpretive qualitative design constructing narrative profiles from interviews. The research was conducted over an 18 month period and concentrated on the perspectives of lived experiences within PLC settings of six teachers in Middle and South Georgia. The conceptual framework for the study was Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. The impetus for this study was the researcher's interest in intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivating teachers to embrace professional learning. As Bandura (2008) surmised, individuals gain confidence in their ability through participation in events facilitating success. A guiding desire of the researcher was to learn if a sense of accomplishment encourages teachers' inclination to collaborate.

An emphasis of the study was maturity level of PLC implementation. This was identified with the assistance of Middle Georgia RESA. Schools were in Middle and South Georgia and varied in student population and demographics. The sample population was determined in a purposeful manner. Six teachers from four school districts participated. Three were two elementary teachers, one middle school teacher, and two high school teachers. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all were interviewed virtually. Narrative profiles were used to investigate teachers' perceptions which were then related to the research questions. Interpretations of teachers' perceptions yielded explanatory data describing the emerging themes: *Structured Norms, Motivating Factors, School Culture, and Impact on Teaching and Learning.*

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Chapter I

Introduction

Darling-Hammond's (1994) work revealed wide ranging disparities in teacher preparation programs. These disparities were viewed as underlying causes of ineffective teaching practices which, in turn, led to decreased student performance. Early efforts to address this were aimed primarily toward content expertise which served as a basis for more intensive routes to *field* certification, meaning subject area concentration (Darling-Hammond, 1996). More rigorous certification programs led to fewer students entering university education programs. Further evaluation of "teacher quality" led to the discovery of an "interdependent relationship" between "strong disciplinary knowledge (a major in the field taught) and substantial knowledge of education (full certification)" which is strongly correlated to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 26). This prompted some universities to require degrees in a content area with teaching certification only being obtained through a master's program. Such measures only further reduced the number of Americans entering the teaching profession. Using data from the United States Department of Education's Title II Report, Partelow (2019) discovered the number of students entering a university teacher preparation program decreased by one third since 2010. Additionally, there has been a 28% decline in the number of students completing teacher certification programs once enrolled. To place this in context, the number of bachelor's degrees earned during the same period nearly doubled (Partelow, 2019).

To combat the teacher shortage, some states adopted laws lessening requirements to enter the teaching profession. Georgia's General Assembly enacted legislation allowing districts to petition to waive teacher certification (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2015). Amid this, Georgia adopted extensive evaluation measures known as Teacher Keys Effectiveness

System (TKES) and Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES) (GADOE, 2016). TKES consists of three components: teacher assessment on performance standards (10 total), professional growth, and student growth. LKES consists of four components: leader assessment on performance standards (8 total), student growth, school climate survey, and a combination of additional data such as sample communications with teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Both evaluation measures were designed with certified personnel in mind. As of January 2018, 132 of Georgia's 180 school systems were granted Strategic Waivers School System (SWSS) status (GADOE, 2015). One allowance under SWSS is employment of non-certified personnel, except for those serving as teachers of special education. Local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to provide professional learning to all teachers but must design and provide individualized professional learning opportunities for teachers earning certification via alternative routes. Alternative certification assumes many forms and is often monitored by outside agencies (Partelow, 2019). While more observations of non-certified teachers are required, there are major disparities in individualized professional learning experiences (Gates Foundation, 2014; Guskey, 2014; Kociuruba, 2017). What has transpired in the past few years in Georgia and other states in similar situations is a growing chasm between accountability and truly identifiable professional learning (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Downey, 2016).

Other states allowed similar waivers to combat growing teacher shortages. Georgia is one of five states where the number of inexperienced teachers is nearly triple in schools with large numbers of minority students (Cardichon et al., 2020). Nationwide, "schools with high enrollments of students of color were four times as likely to employ uncertified teachers as were schools with low enrollment of students of color" (Cardichon et al., 2020, p. 6). In relaxing hiring requirements, school systems greatly diminished capacity of teacher quality (Darling-Hammond,

2012; Partelow, 2019). The combination of uncertified teachers who also lack content knowledge placed the burden of professional learning, which must include both content and pedagogy, on local school districts.

The shortage of certified teachers was further compounded by the development of new learning standards for students and major changes in evaluation instruments of teachers and leaders which left many school districts across the United States scrambling for a more systemic approach to professional learning (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Many adopted the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. According to DuFour (2004), effectual professional learning promotes the importance of moving from focusing strictly on improving the quality of individual teachers to developing a "culture of collaboration," (p. 8) working towards an overall enhancement of teaching *and* learning. Effective PLCs consist of six identifiable components:

1. A focus on learning (i.e., 'learning for all') consisting of three sub-questions
    a. What do we want each student to learn?
    b. How will we know when each student has learned it?
    c. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (DuFour, 2004, p. 7).
2. A culture of collaboration
    a. Requires collaborative structure created by educators in the PLC.
3. Collective inquiry
    a. A "systemic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (DuFour, 2004, p. 8).

4. "Action orientation" (Battersby & Verdi, 2015, p. 23) in which teachers work to specifically remove "barriers to success" (DuFour, 2004, p. 9).

5. Commitment to continuous improvement – Teachers "engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning" (DuFour, 2004, p. 8).

6. Focusing on results that address "the *intended* [or prescribed] curriculum" in conjunction with "the *implemented* curriculum (what teachers actually teach)" and the *attained* curriculum (what students learn) (DuFour, 2004, p. 9).

PLCs have become the predominant model of professional development in school settings with a focus on group collaboration working towards improving student achievement (Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, Water, & McNulty, 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). Few studies evaluated how individual teachers within these settings are impacted. Given the downward trend in the number of people interested in becoming teachers and the decline in pre-service candidates completing graduation requirements, a granular view of how professional learning affects teachers' perceptions may enhance the original PLC structure to include opportunities for the development of teacher leadership, leading to a greater sense of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is an "elusive construct" in a field dominated by isolationist practices (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783). This is the reason the researcher believed a qualitative approach would provide a more thorough assessment of the connection between job satisfaction and self-efficacy. Numerous researchers evaluated teacher satisfaction in the context of student achievement (DuFour, 2011; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Guskey, 2007, 2014; Hattie, 2008, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005; Owen, 2015; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Türkoğlu et al. (2017) surveyed nearly 500 Turkish teachers and found "a significant positive relationship between teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction,

and teacher self-efficacy was a significant predictor of job satisfaction" (p. 770). However, the research team found no significant relationship between salary level and teacher self-efficacy (p. 768). Additionally, Marsh et al. (2011) conducted a large-scale study over a three-year period in New York public schools which revealed merit, or pay for performance, had no effect on teachers' "attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors" (p. 2). Similar studies in Texas and Nashville yielded comparable results (Springer et al., 2010, 2012).

These findings and the current state of teaching as a profession prompt questions pertaining more to "professional capital" (Fullan et al., 2015, p. 3) than 'professional capacity' (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). By focusing on developing professional capital, school systems can still adhere to certification requirements, prescribed standards, and accountability measures. However, systems can also "emphasize developing individual and group actions that support accountability within the profession" (Fullan et al., 2015, p. 3). This can be accomplished in a manner that focuses not only on a "collective commitment and responsibility to improve student learning," but also to "strengthen the teaching profession" by emphasizing "internal" accountability over "external" accountability (Fullan et al., 2015, p. 4). As has been noted, there is an undeniable and significant correlation between teacher quality defined by content knowledge, certification, and experience and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). As has also been discussed, contrasting complexities of increased accountability at the height of a nationwide teacher shortage, compounded by alternative certification routes, necessitates LEAs to act as a single entity to develop fully certified content experts adept at collaboration within and beyond PLCs who are capable of serving as teacher leaders. As a veteran high school teacher, former elementary and high school principal, and district leader, it was the hope of this researcher to obtain commentary useful in better

designing and implementing PLCs to enable more productive experiences and stronger feelings of efficacy.

Statement of the Problem

A national review of teacher preparation programs revealed stark contrasts in requirements for certification (Darling-Hammond, 1994). The findings of the review led to a call for an increase in staff, or professional development. Much of the resulting professional development came in the form of single or small groups of teachers attending off campus, subject specific workshops in lecture style format (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DuFour, 2004, Guskey, 2007). A new age of teacher and leader accountability mandated by federal legislation prompted many school systems to implement PLCs (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; Battersby &Verdi, 2015; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Design and operation of PLCs are left largely to the interpretation of school leaders (Bierly et al., 2016; DeMatthews, 2014; Fullan, 2009; Guskey, 2014; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014) and vary greatly in effectiveness (Bayar, 2014; DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Guskey, 2007). Research findings indicated disparaging views of functionality and ambiguous application of commonly held tenets of PLCs (Antinluoma et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2017; Guskey, 2014). Reasons for misguided attempts may stem from mandated requirements to provide professional learning and placing responsibility for doing so on local districts, most commonly at the principal's discretion. Additionally, evaluation instruments encourage subjectivity (Downey, 2016). To be deemed a teacher "leader," teachers must "continually" serve as role models (GADOE, 2019c, n.p.). To achieve maximum proficiency as an instructional leader, principals must "actively and continually" promote a "shared vision of teaching and learning that fosters excellence" (GADOE, 2019b, n.p.). Adding these issues to the complexity of human interactions in school environments

in which individuals traditionally operate mostly in isolation, only fuels the negative rhetoric against public education (Downey, 2016).

Educational leaders and researchers found professional development by local educational agencies, state accountability measures for teachers and leaders, and even federal programs funding mandates do not significantly affect student academic progress in the United States as evidenced by national and international measures of achievement. Data from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) revealed an average increase in proficiency of two percent in performance on Georgia's test for accountability, Georgia Milestones, from 2016 to 2019 (GOSA, 2020). On end of grade assessments, the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency from 2017 to 2018 increased slightly in all areas except for science. From 2018 to 2019, an increase was evident in all subject areas except for Social Studies. When comparing the changes from 2017 to 2018 and 2018 to 2019, students improved at the same rate in Math (with a change of 1.0 for both), slightly more in ELA and Science and less in Social Studies. On end of course assessments, the overall increase in all scores was higher from 2018 to 2019 compared to 2017 to 2018 in all areas except for the Social Sciences (Economics and U.S. History), in which areas the increase was less significant (GOSA, 2020).

Purpose

A commonly implemented initiative to improve student performance through teacher collaboration is PLCs. Much of the research to date focuses on collective efficacy of teachers (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Gray et al., 2017; Ping et al., 2018; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Therefore, The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. The focus was teachers participating in PLCs at three levels of

maturity (Antinluoma et al., 2018): implementation, emergent, and fully operational. The school at the implementation level was one in which incorporation of PLCs as a means of improving instructional practices was in years one through three. The school at the emergent level was one in which PLCs were part of the school structure for at least two years but had not fully developed. The school at the fully operational level was one in which PLCs were established and functioning sufficiently for three years or more. Using interviews and observations, the researcher investigated the extent to which PLC collaboration was designed to create leadership opportunities for individual teachers. An extension of this was to explore teachers' perceptions of PLC collaboration related to self-efficacy and autonomy. The researcher studied the experiences of teachers participating in three levels of maturity to determine the extent to which they perceived their involvement as a contributing or non-contributing facilitator of teacher leadership and self-efficacy and to help educators better understand PLC effectiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy.

Research Questions

1. What are the life and career experiences of public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities?

2. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

3. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities perceive the effects of PLCs on their instructional practices?

Significance

Multiple reform efforts and legislative requirements aimed only at improving student achievement have impacted the capacity to develop teacher leaders (Lowery-Moore et al., 2016). Much research in the area of PLCs has focused on student achievement and not on teacher leaders (Bierly et al., 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005). There is indication of a positive relationship between teacher empowerment and student achievement. There is also evidence teachers view collaboration designed to improve student achievement as a catalyst for leadership opportunities and enhanced self-efficacy (Owen, 2016). The findings from this basic interpretive qualitative study have the potential to extend existing research, which focuses primarily on the impact of PLC collaboration on student achievement, by providing insight into teachers' perceptions through their own narratives of the impact on their development as leaders.

Additionally, the success of teacher leaders is impacted by leaders' attitudes towards school governance (Bierly et al., 2016; Quin et al., 2015; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014; Wilson, 2016). DeMatthews (2014) discovered principals' possessing a proclivity to nurture teacher leadership as a contributing factor to the successful implementation of PLCs. A need for an impact analysis has also been identified regarding principal-led PLCs (DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Quin et al., 2015; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Most research regarding PLCs, however, is directed at the collaborative process in group settings in which conventional leaders desire to retain ultimate authority over processes and procedures (DeMatthews, 2014).

Through this basic interpretive qualitative study, the researcher can potentially provide a better understanding of how teachers perceive collaboration as facilitator of leadership opportunities. Specific questions may impact understanding of self-efficacy and its relevance to leadership development. Analyses of teacher perceptions can be used to reveal a more comprehensive assessment and aid in improving the overall effectiveness of PLCs. Although small in nature, the findings of this study may provide LEAs with grassroots implications of policies and procedures pertaining to teacher leadership development (Spillane, 2002, p. 385).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. This study of PLCs and self-efficacy of teachers is valuable for many reasons. Schools that have PLCs or schools that plan to utilize them, as well as school leaders across the state of Georgia, may gain valuable insight about the best strategies and practices that have had the most significant impact on student achievement. Administrators at the building and district level, local and state boards of education, regional education service agencies (RESA), and university, college, and certification agencies may also benefit from the findings of this study as they enact laws, regulations, and policies and hire, develop, and train new and veteran teachers.

Conceptual Framework

According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), a conceptual framework is the "superstructure" for research (p. 9). My overall conceptual framework was grounded in the work of Fitzpatrick et al. (1998). Sound qualitative research consists of "curiosity, a propensity for listening rather than talking, creativity in getting to the question at hand, and a belief that people have multiple realities" (p. 29). The foundation of my conceptual framework was Bandura's (1977, 1993, 1997,

2008) theory of self-efficacy. Levels of self-efficacy are reflected in self-assurance, incentive, and determination (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Underlying my conceptual framework was my own curiosity about why individuals are motivated to succeed, especially in academic structures normally relegating educators to isolation. Since I am a practitioner of education, and have been for many years, my "positionality" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 10), in the proposed study reflected a heightened awareness of school improvement initiatives. As personal experiences are impossible to ignore, I used prior knowledge to guide my efforts in focusing on the self-efficacy of others and allowing the unanticipated to fully develop (Maxwell, 2013).

Concept Map

Concept maps represent individual meaning to and relevance of the researcher's pursuit of knowledge (Maxwell, 2013). They are "interrelated and evolving [in] nature . . . with regards to "their relationship to research design" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 58). In framing concepts of a study, researchers should ensure they have made:

> a grounded argument about why the topic of study matters to its various and often intersecting fields, why the methodological approach is used to explore the topic is valid, and the ways in which the research design is appropriate, and the methods are rigorous (p. 68).

I created a concept map early in my research process to develop a conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013). While some view concept maps as merely a visual representation of the researcher's process (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), I initially used my concept map to organize my thoughts. It was not until many revisions later I realized the need to abandon a research question pertaining specifically to principals as instructional leaders. This revelation came during my review of the literature. Fullan (2014) asserted instructional leadership requires capacity building

and promoting collaboration, however, it is not the job of the principal to develop leadership in individual teachers. He added autonomy (i.e., efficacy) should be advanced through cooperation and collaboration (Fullan, 2014). Fullan's view of instructional leadership greatly impacted my own, which led me to revise my lens of principal as simply a facilitator and collaborative partner (See Figure 1).

As my concept map (Figure 1) illustrates, an emphasis of PLC collaboration is to develop self-efficacy and teacher leadership capacity. This emerges through consistent and continuous efforts to encourage expertise, nurture innovative strategies, and create opportunities for success (DuFour, 2004). Leadership can manifest in different areas, such as those listed in the Teacher Roles grid on the right side of that map. The role of principals was considered in the context of facilitator. Instructional leadership is a critical factor but was not a primary focus of this study. The common characteristic of principals and teachers as collaborative partners was incorporated into the interview process to discover perceptions of impact on self-efficacy and leadership development.

Maxwell (2013) stated, "there is no one right concept map for the phenomena you're studying . . ." (p. 63). The importance is more on the linkage between the information contained in a graphical representation than in the representation itself. In developing my conceptual framework, I realized in the examination of the potential of PLCs in developing teacher efficacy and leadership, I must consider the many facets of interpersonal relationships in educational settings. Thus, teachers' perceptions of efficacy and leadership opportunities were studied in combination with perceptions of principals as instructional leaders in facilitating PLC implementation. Anything less may not yield a full assessment.
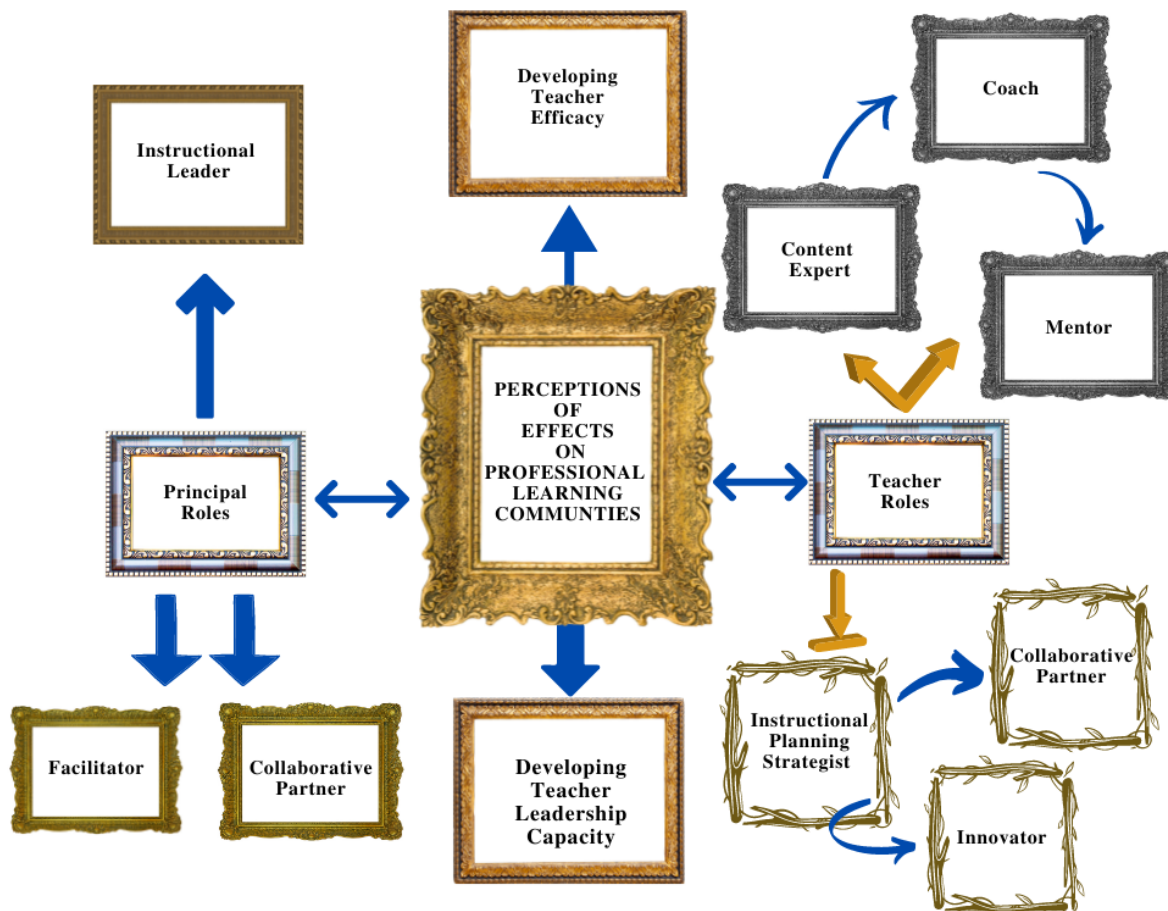
Figure 1.

Concept Map

Methodology

Based upon information obtained from the RESA, the researcher conducted a basic

interpretive qualitative study in four school systems in Middle and South Georgia. The RESA

worked extensively with superintendents over the course of the past three years to assist in

district-wide implementation of PLCs. I contacted Middle Georgia RESA via phone and email

after attending several workshops and conferences conducted by them. The executive director,

director of teaching and learning, and the director of professional learning, who have worked in

numerous schools throughout various districts, readily identified schools in which professional

learning communities were in one of three stages of development: 1) implementation, 2) emerging, and 3) fully operational.

Teachers from each identified school system with first-hand experience in participating in PLCs were selected through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). The researcher left teacher selection to volunteers recommended by their principals based on the study's criteria. To broaden the prospects of extending data collection due to the small number of participants, I employed "opportunistic or emergent sampling" to prevent neglect of information pertinent to my research (Patton, 2002, p. 240) and "to develop a participant pool based on key respondents' suggestions of who else would provide valuable perspectives – to try to find people in each [school] who [are] most knowledgeable about" the topic of study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, pp. 61, 62). This allowed me to adjust my interview process and/or participants if observations revealed opportunities for stronger narratives.

Interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed (Saldaña, 2016). An ongoing and inductive analysis was used to identify themes and patterns of response through reading and memos. These were organized across categories and individuals via matrixes (Maxwell, 2013). Interview transcripts were coded according to theoretical categories that emerged from the conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, transcripts were coded using organizational and substantive categories (Maxwell, 2013). Descriptors were collated to measure frequency (Maxwell, 2013). Recurring themes aided in interpretation of patterns (Creswell, 2009). Interview notes and impressions were used for researcher memos and reflections to help monitor subjectivity.

In addition to researcher created interview questions, I received permission to use an adapted model of the Vibrant School Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018). This

instrument is administered via survey, but some items can easily be adapted to open-ended response type questions. The Scale is a follow up to the Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale which primarily addresses teacher and student interactions (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The Vibrant School Scale includes three subscales, but only the two referred to as "enlivened minds" and "emboldened voice" (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018) were used to formulate open-ended questions pertaining to teacher efficacy arising from experiences in PLCs. Basic interpretive qualitative study methods were employed to gain increased awareness and understanding of teachers' perspectives in three school settings. As far fewer studies pertaining to PLCs are qualitative, this research has the potential to expand knowledge of teachers' perceptions by providing insight only possible through narrative inquiry. Better understanding teacher perceptions may lead to higher staff renewal rates and lower exits from the profession.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was that of my own bias. I have a proclivity for enabling success in PLC settings. To address this, I continually reflected to remain skeptical of my own work to preserve the integrity of my research (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, the intangible limitations of the impact of experiences on perspectives and how these perspectives influence experiences must be acknowledged (Patton, 2002) as teacher perspectives were at the core of this research project.

Seeking data from public school teachers only must also be considered a limitation in relation to private school settings. In my own experience as a former high school teacher and elementary principal, I understood these are all very different environments. My experience as a middle school teacher, albeit brief, also provided knowledge of some semblance of familiarity with middle school but with far more concentration in specific content areas. The public school

setting was chosen mostly due to a more predominant emphasis of a collaborative model of operation and school improvement. Nonetheless, public school scheduling and mentality was also noted as a limitation. The often common approach of collaboration and cooperation might discourage individuality in responses to interview questions. Participants might fear negative comments as oppositional to the greater good.

Traditionally, PLCs are conducted weekly or biweekly on a chosen day and held during teachers' planning periods. The researcher considered how this impacted teachers' perspectives. For example, if teachers view PLCs as an intrusion on their time, did this negatively predispose them to potential benefits of participation? As summer and fall semesters were planned for data collection, some teachers may have been reluctant to participate, as their focus concerned preparing students for mandated testing in the spring. Thus, the very nature of the unexpected in the public school setting was considered. Therefore, the researcher allotted ample time for interviews in a period beginning no earlier than two months before the school start date.

Even though multiple states adopted the Common Core in an attempt to standardize education in the United States, schools in more rural, southern states continue to operate differently than those in other parts of the country with higher concentrations of students attending largely populated, metropolitan schools (Freeman, 2014). Additionally, school leadership styles are a determinant of effective PLCs (DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Fullan 2002, 2014; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Both factors can impede widespread application of research findings conducted in a qualitative manner. Further, teachers' experiences, educational backgrounds, and certification levels were possible limitations as they can impact willing participation in PLCs and positive view of school culture. Finally, the nature of a basic interpretive qualitative study was a limitation in and of itself.

Chapter Summary

In this study, the researcher addressed teachers' perceptions of effectiveness of PLCs. An intent of this researcher was to gather information from teachers' perspectives of opportunities for professional growth, especially in regard to teacher leadership and self-efficacy. I conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study because of my "interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). My "intellectual goal" was "gaining insight" to "why" participants describe PLC participation in the manner they do (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). I modeled my overall approach of qualitative inquiry using suggestions from Merriam (2002, pp. 40-46). I used an "in-depth, phenomenologically based" interview process as my primary source of data collection (Seidman, 2013, pp. 15-22). I also used Patton's (2002) semi-structured process of interviewing. This guided the process of fairly and accurately describing perceptions of others. I subscribed to knowledge gained from Maxwell (2013), Merriam (2002), Patton, and Seidman (2013) to guard against bias and subjectivity.

A comprehensive review of literature pertaining to PLCs is included in chapter II. The researcher conducted extensive analysis of hundreds of potential references to compare findings in terms of relevancy to this study. The review was also uses to increase awareness, understanding, and knowledge of lived experiences within PLC settings, the effect of PLC participation on teacher efficacy, and the effect of PLC participation on instructional practices.

Definition of Terms

Accountability. A measurement of teachers' and leaders' commitment to school improvement ranging from operating safe school environment to enhancing student performance.

Collaboration. "Expert, inspired, and passionate teachers and school leaders working together to maximize the effect of their teaching on all students in their care" (Hattie, 2015, p. 2)

Collective Efficacy. "A group's shared belief in the conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477).

Enabling School Structures. Structures empowering teachers intentionally through systematic and ongoing professional learning opportunities.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The nation's main education law for all public schools which holds schools accountable for how students learn and achieve and aims to provide an equal opportunity for students who get special education services.

Lived Experiences. "A representation and understanding of a . . . research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge." (Given, 2008).

Professional Learning Community. A community of learners, in which teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning as a best practices approach to fulfilling requirements and promoting professional growth (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2016; Hord, 1997).

Self-efficacy. "Belief in one's agentive capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 382).

Teacher Efficacy. To the degree teachers believe they are capable of controlling "the reinforcement of their actions" (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 202).

Teacher Leader. Teachers who "function efficiently in professional learning communities to impact student learning, contribute to school improvement, inspire excellence in practice, and empower stakeholders to participate in educational improvement" (Jackson et al., 2010).

Chapter II

Literature Review

Organizational theory models in the corporate world serve as the formulation for many collaborative models in the field of education (Covey, 1991; Senge, 1990). Learning communities gained prevalence as a tool of uniting employees through collaborative efforts. Organizational leaders were encouraged to "open up boundaries and stimulate the exchange of ideas" (Garvin, 1993, p. 91). Comprehensive learning audits measured "cognitive and behavioral changes" in an ongoing fashion to measure the impact of learning communities on productivity (Garvin, 1993, p. 91). Although not a new phenomenon, the implementation of PLCs has been the overarching initiative to foster professional development of educators (Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Vescio et al., 2008) and enhance collective efficacy (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Gray et al., 2017).

In Georgia, principals are held accountable as both organizational managers and instructional leaders through the LKES. Instructional leadership is a top priority as evidenced by standard one of LKES which serves as measurement of administrators' fulfillment in this role (GADOE, 2019b, n.p.). Guidelines in meeting expectations of the standard specifically address the importance of building capacity of teacher leaders. Schools and districts are given sole responsibility of fostering teacher leadership development and many rely upon PLCs (Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, Water, & McNulty, 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). However, PLC structures vary widely (Gray et al., 2017; Ping et al., 2018) and principals' understanding of their role in implementing effective PLCs is unclear (Bierly et al., 2016; DeMatthews, 2014).

Recent research pertaining to PLCs focused on how collaboration in this setting impacts student achievement (Bayar, 2014; Bullough, 2007; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Owen, 2016;

Ping et al., 2018). Additionally, teacher leadership and self-efficacy are usually evaluated as an extension of collective efficacy when examining in the context of PLCs (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Gray et al., 2017). Widely known researchers in the field evaluated teacher participation in PLCs in the context of school culture (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey, 2007; Marzano et al., 2005). Perceptions of PLCs in improving instructional practices is a component of effective collaboration not often considered, especially in regard to promoting self-efficacy (Guskey, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). The purpose of this study was to gather information from teachers' perspectives of opportunities for professional growth. The primary goal was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of effectiveness in developing teacher leadership and promoting self-efficacy. The focus was teachers participating in PLCs at three levels of maturity: implementation, emergent, and fully operational. The conceptual framework for this study was Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Background

The researcher has great personal interest in the area of study. As someone who spent 18 years teaching high school, my professional learning experiences differed greatly from those I designed and implemented as an instructional leader over the past 7 years. I view the role of instructional leader equally as importantly as that of a classroom teacher providing instruction to students. While there is an abundance of information available pertaining to PLCs, it is dominated by meta-analyses conducted by a select group of experts. As such, there are few studies giving voice to individual teachers. There has been a recent emphasis on the importance of student feedback; especially in the form of student conferencing. Yet there is scant emphasis on teacher feedback. Data collection commonly occurs using quantitative measures (i.e., Likert Scale

surveys). There have been many times in my administrative service when teachers graciously accepted even the smallest opportunities to be heard. Given the increasing demands upon teachers and the ever-looming concern of accountability, this researcher believes even small studies conducted in this manner can prompt the sort of dialogue necessary in refining professional learning opportunities.

Statement of the Problem

Educational leaders and researchers found professional development by LEAs, state accountability measures for teachers and leaders, and even federal programs funding mandates do not significantly affect student academic progress in the United States as evidenced by national and international measures of achievement. Data from GOSA revealed an average increase in proficiency of two percent in performance on Georgia's test for accountability, Georgia Milestones, from 2016 to 2019 (GOSA, 2020).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. The focus will be teachers participating in PLCs at three levels of maturity (Antinluoma et al., 2018): implementation, emergent, and fully operational. The school at the implementation level will be one where incorporation of PLCs as a means of improving instructional practices is in years one to three. The school at the emergent level will be one where PLCs have been part of the school structure for at least two years but have not fully developed. The school at the fully operational level will be one where PLCs are established and functioning sufficiently for three years or more. Using interviews, the researcher will investigate whether PLC collaboration is designed to create leadership opportunities for individual teachers. An extension

of this will be to explore teachers' perceptions of PLC collaboration in leading to a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. The researcher is studying the experiences of teachers participating in three levels of maturity to find out if they perceive their involvement as a contributing or non-contributing facilitator of teacher leadership and self-efficacy and to help educators better understand PLC effectiveness. A commonly implemented initiative to improve student performance through teacher collaboration is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). A large body of research focuses on collective efficacy of teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy.

Research Questions

1. What are the life and career experiences of public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity?

2. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

3. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their instructional practices?

ESSA Requirements for Profess6ional Learning

A heightened awareness for the need of teacher leaders arose soon after implementation of the TKES state mandated accountability measure during the 2016-17 school year (GADOE, 2019a). If rated level four on any of the 10 standards, teachers must "continually seek ways to serve as role models or teacher leaders" (GADOE, 2019c). As a result of changes mandated in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), PLCs have become an integrated part of the current educational landscape (Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, Water, & McNulty, 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). Each state must establish a system of providing educational staff with applicable professional development based on improving instruction and student outcomes (ESSA, 2015). Additionally, school districts are now required to create and provide professional learning opportunities for teachers to meet and maintain certification credentials (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2010; GAPSC, 2019).

Historical Perspective of Professional Learning in America

A long history of widely disparaging differences in teacher preparation programs led to increased emphasis on teacher quality in the 1990s (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 1996). An identified link between student achievement and teacher certification prompted the reevaluation of teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Faced with increasing rigor in educational standards, school districts struggled to develop appropriate professional learning opportunities to bridge gaps in teachers' knowledge (Bayar, 2014). Hirsh (2001) found professional development the most suitable replacement for lack of preparation but warned it must not be "poorly designed" and negate "what helps adults acquire the knowledge and skills that help students achieve" (p. 255). A professional community of learners, in which teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning is a best practices

approach to fulfilling requirements and promoting professional growth (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2016; Hord, 1997).

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities are comprised of "teachers committed to collaborating in an ongoing process of collaborative inquiry and action research to accomplish improved outcomes for the students they serve with continuous, job-embedded learning" (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 18). Little (1993) aligned professional learning with teachers' "capacity to … individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reform" (p. 130). Her early warnings regarding policy changes and school reform remain highly relevant to effectiveness of professional learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Nonetheless, Little cautioned against placing collaboration solely in the hands of teachers may lead to negative impacts on school culture. She asserted efforts in professional development in reaction to policy reform had been "too often substantively weak and politically marginal" (p. 148). In discussing "scale" and "scope," Little predicted the ongoing conundrum of ensuring equity of opportunity and disparaging interpretations of professional learning (p. 137). Her "Six Principles" serve as standards for initiating change necessary due to reform through professional learning via "joint" communities (p. 137-139).

Teachers as Learners

Although referring to children, Garner (2007) created the concept of "metability" to illustrate "learning is created by the learner and generates its own energy that reinforces itself through a cycle of ongoing creativity and change" (pp. XIV, XV). Adult learners tend to be subjected to or affected by professional development based upon their mental models (Green, 2000; Senge, 1990). That is, they approach professional learning with their own preconceived

notions about its purpose (Gray et al., 2017). In revisiting *The Eight-Year Study*, which began in

1932 and was sponsored by the Progressive Education Association for the purpose of immersing

teachers in the curriculum, Bullough (2007) incorporated the complexity of school reform with

the changing role of teachers in the advent of successful PLC implementation. He noted teachers

participating in the study began to operate in a more "democratic" fashion and communally

addressed "virtually every aspect of the school day" (p. 170). He then aligned the findings of the

study with the five dimensions of PLCs (Hord, 2004). As a result of participating in the study,

teachers surpassed the PLC dimension *collective learning and application* due to a "high[er]

value placed on investment in teacher learning" (Bullough, 2007, p. 177). Bullough's association

between the study and PLCs occurred during the surge of importance of the latter, as few

longitudinal studies existed regarding teacher collaboration. Bullough asserted many who

implement PLCs focus exclusively on student achievement and not on developing a "social

philosophy" (p. 176). The author suggested five lessons to reform school culture. The first was

developing teacher leadership as a necessity of school reform. He described the other four as:

> … powerful teacher education is more than a matter of learning about and
>
> practicing promising teaching techniques; it involves engagement in exploring,
>
> with others, pressing personal and professional problems and issues … [fostering]
>
> trust among teachers and life-enhancing relationships with one another and with
>
> young people … [instilling] a mutual quest for change and improvement … and
>
> thoughtful educational experimentation … remaining open to contrary evidence
>
> (p.179).

The combined factors of teacher accountability and increasing demands to improve

student achievement compelled a mindset shift regarding adequate measures to empower teachers

through effective, collegial, and collective efforts (Barton & Stepanek, 2012; Bierly et al., 2016; Guskey, 2014; Owen, 2016). Professional Learning Communities are designed to develop teacher capacity, foster collegiality, nurture conviviality, bridge the gap between teachers and administrators, and improve student performance (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; Barton & Stepanek, 2012; DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour, 2004; Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004; Owen, 2016). A leading authority on teacher leadership, Darling-Hammond (1994, 1996) determined American teachers operate very differently than counterparts across the globe, teaching more classes and using less of their time planning for instruction, consulting with colleagues, working with students individually, visiting peers' classrooms, or engaging in other types of professional development activities. This continues to be true over two decades later for most teachers in the United States (Gates Foundation, 2014). Thus, a more comprehensive review of the structure of PLCs and their effectiveness is necessary (Gilbert et al., 2018).

Vescio et al. (2008) examined 55 sources "connect[ing] learning communities with teaching practice and/or student learning" (p. 82). With respect to changes in instructional strategies, their analysis of studies yielded few details specific to individual teaching practices. Instead, "more specific information on how the teaching culture changed as a result of teachers' participation in a PLC" was reported (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 84). In fact, the findings of every study illustrated "establishing a PLC contributes to a fundamental shift in the habits of mind that teachers bring to their daily work" (p. 84). Additional review of the studies led to a classification of commonalities as: "collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning" (p. 84). Collaboration manifested in many forms ranging from lesson sharing to book studies and aided in moving teachers from "isolationist" mode to one of shared responsibility (p. 85). Teachers engaged in learning communities "focused on instructional

practice reported changes in instructional culture" emphasizing the imperative of clearly articulated expectations (p. 85). Some studies in the review focused on teacher "authority" (p. 85). As described, "authority" is synonymous with teacher *leadership* and/or teacher *autonomy*. Researchers reported strong links between teacher authority and highly effective PLCs (p. 85). One researcher even reported an impact on "financial and personnel resources" (p. 86). In summary, findings reinforced "continuous teacher learning" as a means of improving culture but did not overwhelmingly reveal a positive impact on daily instructional practices of teachers (p. 86).

Vescio et al. (2008) next examined literature pertaining to PLCs and student achievement. Most studies reviewed (8 of 11) considered the connection between professional development of teachers and student performance (p. 86). The reviewers found "results of student achievement gains varied with the strength of the PLC" (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008). Overall, data indicated a highly positive relationship between student performance and teachers participating in effective and efficient PLCs (p. 87). Moreover, teachers who focused on "the intellectual quality of the student" were "pushed toward the use of authentic pedagogy" (pp. 87-88). This supports the work of Little (2003) who found teacher resistance to professional learning can be traced to preconceived notions influenced by their own, singular classroom experiences or "horizons of observations" (p. 917). When collaboration is based upon data analysis and evaluation of instructional practices driven by inquiry and reflection, increased student achievement is sustainable (Guskey, 2007, 2014; Owen, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

Characteristics of Professional Learning

The education community acknowledges quality of teaching as one the most critical factors affecting student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie 2008). Effective conditions

and characteristics of professional development amplify the potential for practices that lead to improving instructional practices (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2011)). Professional learning is "grounded in a big picture perspective on the purposes and practices of schooling, providing teachers a means of seeing and acting upon the connections among student experiences, teachers' classroom practice, and schoolwide structures and cultures" (Little, 1993, p. 138). Ping et al. (2018) asserted research pertaining to professional learning of teachers has emerged as "independent" of other fields in the study of education (p. 102).

The collaborative research of DuFour and Marzano (2011) led to the formulation of principles many school systems adopted as integral to the process of identifying professional learning needs. The mentality regarding professional development has shifted toward teacher-centered learning grounded in consistent and intentional classroom instruction, which is supported by whole school collaboration in a PLC (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey, 2014). Successful collaboration is comprised of teachers from the same school having the independence to select learning objectives (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). An overarching purpose of PLCs is to "build teacher strength and get motivation right" (Bullough, 2007, p. 179). It is vital to "foster an environment that is conducive to learning" (Garvin, 1993, p. 91). Terms like "ongoing," "collaboration," "administratively supported," and "student learning/achievement" validate the potential of PLCs to inform practice through the simple act of professionals working together for a common goal (Hord, 1997).

Commonly Held Tenets of Professional Learning Communities

While there is no "universal definition" of a PLC, discussions "draw attention to the potential that a range of people based inside and outside a school can mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning as well as school development" (Stoll et al., 2006, pp. 222, 223).

Cornerstones of PLC collaboration are inquiry and reflection (DeMatthews, 2014; Owen, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Since these are difficult to measure, most research centers on collective approaches. DuFour (2004) is widely regarded as an expert in the field of PLCs. He stated the term PLC as being "used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning" (p. 6). He offered clarification by creating three big ideas of PLCs as, "ensuring students learn," creating "a culture of collaboration," to enable the ability to "focus on results" (pp. 6-8). Hord's (2004) early work evolved to focus professional learning around school improvement efforts pertaining to student achievement. She and her colleagues at Learning Forward (n.d.), formerly the National Council on Staff Development, offered three standards of professional learning:

1. Engage in continuous improvement through intensive and ongoing conversations about student data

2. Develop collective responsibility for teachers' impact on student performance

3. Create alignment of expectations in a setting of shared accountability.

Benefits and Effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities

A historical perspective is necessary to frame the lack of understanding of benefits and effectiveness of PLCs with regards to the development of teacher leadership and self-efficacy. Hord (1997) asserted, "if we could better understand the phenomenon of producing change-ready schools (those that value change and seek changes that will improve their schools), we could develop a more effective strategy for pursuing continuous school improvement" (p. 7). Oakes (1989), from her studies of school context, maintained: "There is evidence that a 'professional' staff will work toward implementing strategies and programs to improve results" when given proper guidance and allowed input (1989, p. 194). The National Joint Committee on Learning

Disabilities (NJCLD) (2000) described essential requirements of successful implementation of professional learning in the following manner:

- Supports the ongoing acquisition of new skills to ensure … continuous inquiry and reflection … Protecting and nurturing research-based approaches [so that all students] achieve in the general curriculum

- Requires strong leadership, supported by the entire educational community, that encourages and provides staff with opportunities and resources to pursue the acquisition of new skills

- Adequately funded and … an integral part of the school's strategic plan … perceived by the entire district and community as a critical factor in the quest for excellence in student achievement

- Provides sufficient time during the workday for staff members to learn and work together

- Requires an understanding of … systemic change (p. 3).

Unfortunately, there is often a disconnect between prescribed duties and responsibilities of teachers and professional learning (Fullan, 2009). To be fully effective, professional learning "must include high quality, ongoing training that reflects a variety of approaches, with intensive follow up and support" (NJCLD, 2000, p. 2). Fullan (2009) suggested as few as 20% of teachers experienced meaningful professional learning beneficial to their craft. Collectively, ineffective professional learning experiences lead to a culture of negativity (Kociuruba, 2017). "Effective professional development plans promote collaborative relationships, partnerships, increased parent involvement, and strong stakeholder support" (NJCLD, 2000, p. 3). Continued

commitment and "long term support" are hallmarks of efficient professional development (Klingner, 2004, p. 249).

Engaging teachers in meaningful discussions during PLCs, connected to their practice and targeted to the students they serve, leads to improved instruction and higher student outcomes (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Owen, 2016). Highly functioning PLCs involve infrastructure changes leading to continuous school improvement (Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004). Operative PLCs are "dynamic and integrated" (NJCLD, 2000, p. 3) and teachers act as "collaborators in the process" of change for school improvement (Klingner, 2004, p. 249). Additionally, "… the more people believe that they can influence and control the organization [through shared power], the greater organizational effectiveness and member satisfaction will be" (Kouzes & Pozner, 2007, p. 10). Research indicates a high level of complexity when attempting to measure PLC effectiveness, even more so when seeking to illicit concrete descriptions of benefits of participation (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Bullough, 2007; Downey, 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

Factors Affecting Professional Learning Community Implementation

Multiple theories exist regarding PLC effectiveness (Bayar, 2014; Guskey, 2002). Many align enhanced student performance with effective PLC implementation (Guskey, 2007, 2014). Hord and Sommers (2008) explained the PLC has been publicized as an important facilitator of systemic improvement. It has been branded in boundless ways, depending on perspective (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2016). A meta-analysis of school improvement efforts revealed critical components of effective PLCs to be defined expectations through common language and communal responsibility (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). This leads to a sense of "shared knowledge" instilling collegial "common ground" (DuFour et al., 2004, p. 137). Collaboration in

multiple variations is fundamental to systemic change through professional learning (Guskey, 2002; Hord, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011)). However, teachers often need to be taught *how* to collaborate (Abadiano & Turner, 2004) as much of their work is completed in isolation (Klingner, 2004). Additionally, teachers "need differentiated supports to ensure that they can work together" (Thession & Starr, 2011, p. 54). Team building must be designed to facilitate collaborative problem solving (Barton & Stepanek, 2012).

Allotting adequate amounts of time to implement professional learning is yet another serious concern of teachers (Klingner, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011)). Bayar (2014) found teachers preferred extending professional learning opportunities over long periods of time and desired they be based on specific needs of the teachers. Setting aside that time generally requires extension of normal work hours and becomes the fiscal responsibility of the school district, which serves as an ongoing barrier (Abadiano & Turner, 2004). Leonard and Leonard (2003) acknowledged "habitual teacher collaborative practice" is a "certain expectation that is clearly espoused at the highest policy and administrative levels and supported in actual measures" (p. 7). However, simply scheduling PLCs in a systemic fashion only signifies compliance with state and federal regulations prompting varying degrees of success (Bayar, 2014; DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Guskey, 2007).

Graham (2007) found leadership was "one of the most important factors underlying perceived success [of PLCs]" (p. 10). Many principals acknowledged the importance of fully functioning PLCs and asserted the importance of instructional leadership; however, a solid and shared understanding is often elusive (Bierly et al., 2016; DeMatthews, 2014; Hord & Sommer, 2008; Watson, 2014). One explanation is, while there has been much talk about the importance of

PLCs, little attention has been given to expected outcomes of PLC collaboration (Hord &

Sommers, 2008, p. 8). The NJCLD (2000) indicated professional learning is based on:

1. The principles of adult learning

2. The three phases of change process: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization

3. A variety of approaches that may include these models: teacher research, peer coaching,

   portfolio development, … and inquiry

4. Planned follow up that includes peer coaching, collegial support groups, mentoring …

5. Collaborative skills [development] to make decisions, solve problems, and work together

6. Ongoing evaluation of the use and effectiveness of the [professional learning] plan (pp. 3,

   4).

   Further, district level leadership is deemed equally important to school level leadership in

successful implementation of PLCs. Thessin and Starr (2011) defined "key roles" of district

leaders as:

- Ownership and support — Districts must involve teachers and administrators in

  developing and leading the PLC process.

- Professional development — Districts must teach administrators and teachers how to work

  together effectively in PLCs.

- Clear improvement process — Districts must demonstrate how PLCs fit into the district's

  improvement process so that each PLC's work fits into an overall plan; and

- Differentiated support — Districts must support schools according to their unique needs to

  help them move to the next step in their PLC growth (p. 50).

Conversely, school level autonomy via principals' interpretation of PLC expectations can lead to

ambiguity, igniting frustration leading to misguided intentions (Thessin & Starr, 2011).

Kociuruba's (2017) work exemplifies negative impacts of lack of leadership input and participation in PLC implementation. He conducted a case study in a South Carolina high school to examine teachers' perceptions of PLC implementation. In absence of structure and defined expectations, teachers perceived PLCs as a poorly communicated directive which led to negative impacts on school culture (Kociurbua, 2017). They reported positive attributes of PLCs as being "sounding board[s]" and "working together to gather . . . new ideas" (p. 50). Based upon teachers' interview responses, however, many conversations were little more than gripe sessions which generally serve to fuel negative perceptions of school culture (DuFour, 2011). They expressed gratification for opportunities to collaborate, but cited issues with the quality, such as the 'forced mixture of professionals' with competing interests and varying understandings of the PLC process (p. 51). Additionally, they echoed concerns found in similar studies. They expressed administrators seemed disinterested and did not offer adequate time necessary to fully explore the possibilities of operational PLCs (p. 52). When asked to comment on communication and collaboration in combination, teachers responded in varying ways that further indicated the detrimental impacts of dysfunctional PLCs. Teachers clearly believed administrators did not possess situational awareness critical to maintaining effective PLCs. They viewed PLC implementation as an inadequate attempt to revive the culture of the school. While they cited building "comradery" as the most positive aspect of PLC participation, some lamented a negative effect on classroom "autonomy" (p. 54). An overarching scarcity of guidance deemed PLCs a "waste of time" by one participant (p. 54) and others felt "resentment" towards administrators even by non-participating teachers (p. 60). While acknowledging the limitations of a case study, Kociuruba (2017) provided insight to teachers' perspectives of poorly implemented PLCs

whereas the preponderance of literature indicated mostly positive attributes of PLCS (Vescio et al., 2008) or served as a PLC guide to successful implementation.

Guskey (2002) warned even effective professional learning implementation neglects proper "systemic evaluation" (p. 46). His "critical levels of professional development evaluation" provided a framework for measuring progress through gathering of evidence (pp. 46-50). Although level five of the evaluation instrument specifically addresses student outcomes, evaluation levels one through four center around development of participants working in collaboration to promote organizational change. His insight and expertise are often used by designers of professional learning as a means differentiating between true professional development and ineffective, inadequate attempts (Guskey, 2002, p. 51).

Collaboration

Leaders in the field of education have often modeled change initiatives after organizational theories used in the corporate world (Senge, 1990). In professional collaboration, early "training models" were insufficient as they did nothing to "contend with fundamental debates and disagreements about the purposes of schooling, the relationships between teachers and students, and the obligations of teachers to a wider larger community" (Little, 1993, p. 140). Schmoker (2004) stated, "The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting" (p. 48). Little's (1993) work regarding teacher collaboration is considered "landmark" and "definitive" (Schmoker, 2004, p. 49). She assessed earlier attempts at collaborative inquiry as including "precedents worth preserving and dilemmas worth revealing" (Little, 1993, p. 139). She warned against collaboration focusing only on building convivial relationships. She contended, relevant and meaningful professional learning

"provides the possibility for teachers and others to interrogate their individual beliefs and the institutional patterns of practice" (Little, 1993, p. 139). In doing so, she called for an early shift from staff development in the form of training to truly collaborative approaches to school improvement rich in dialogue and shared ownership.

Effective collaboration is the foundation of true learning communities driven by common goals of improving student achievement (Darling-Hammond & McGlaughlin, 1995; Hord, 1997). Collaboration is deemed effective when it is "deliberate" and "intentional" (Wells & Feun, 2013, p. 236) and there is true depth of analysis of instructional practices aimed at improving the process of teaching and learning to promote enhanced student performance (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Schmoker (2007) warned against teacher collaboration functioning as "mere collegiality" (p. 49). He argued productive collaboration occurs when groups of teachers "meet regularly to share, refine and assess the impact of lessons and strategies continuously to help increasing numbers of students learn at higher levels" (p. 49). Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) proffered most schools in the United States either had no existence of meaningful collaboration through professional development or that most efforts were woefully inadequate.

Hattie (2008) labeled effective collaboration as collective *teacher* efficacy. This is derived from Bandura's (1997) definition of collective efficacy as "a group's shared belief in the conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (p. 477). Hattie (2015) found only the factor "teacher estimates of achievement" (effect size 1.67) was more impactful on student performance than "collective teacher efficacy" (effect size 1.57) (Hattie, 2015, p. 81).

While group collaboration is a primary focus in educational settings, emphasis should also be placed on how individuals react to change (Fullan, 2001; Senge, 1990). Leonard and Leonard (2003) conducted a qualitative study on teachers' perceptions of "*actual* collaborative conditions and circumstances" (p. 3). A questionnaire was administered to 56 teachers in 45 schools spanning 8 Northern Louisiana districts. The goal was to further investigate teachers' belief systems concerning collaboration and the purpose was to secure commentary on collaboration pertaining specifically to that which led to enhanced student performance (p. 3). Over 73% of respondents reported feelings of inadequate collaboration, especially in the form of shared work (p. 4). The lack of additional time to collaborate was an often-expressed concern, but some were unwilling to commit to any collaboration beyond the hours of the normal school day. Prevalent themes were indifferent attitude and lack of commitment. Additionally, some remarked most teachers would not consider adding time to their workday without pay even if it benefited the greater good. Questions about administrative support yielded wide variations in perceptions. Some viewed their principal as a champion of collaboration while others deemed theirs as mere delegators (p. 5).

The seminal work of Leonard and Leonard (2003) provided perception data echoing sentiments which remained intact in many school environments (Barton & Stepanek, 2012; DuFour, 2011; Klingner, 2004) That is, collaboration should not be relegated to interpretations of individual schools (Leonard & Leonard, 2003, p. 7). Collaboration must be fully integrated at the core level of all academic discussions and administrators must ensure effectiveness by developing structures promoting positive cultures (DuFour, 2011, p. 61).

Misconceptions and/or Misunderstandings of Purpose

Hord (1997, 2004) insisted educators must come to an intimate appreciation of the process of change for PLC implementation to be successful and for the promises of new practices to be realized. Fragmented execution of PLCs occurs when there is no shared understanding of purpose and leadership is not trusted to provide teachers active participation opportunities (Bayar, 2014; Bierly et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DeMatthews, 2014; Gray et al., 2017). This practically ensures negative reactions due to PLCs being deemed superficial and lacking in quality and relativity (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey, 2014). "Adults are motivated to learn when professional development provides opportunity to achieve competency, combines independent and dependent approaches, and respects their intellectual potential and capability" (NJCLD, 2000, p. 3). When teachers are not involved in planning and design of professional learning opportunities, they are more likely to feel disenfranchised and become disinterested (Bayar, 2014).

Hord (1997) determined six attributes of PLC effectiveness: Supportive and Shared Leadership, Collective Creativity, Shared Values and Vision, Physical Conditions, People Capacities, Shared Personal Practice. The need to create such distinctive categories to measure effectiveness of implementation illustrates PLC collaboration is multi-faceted and steeped in human interaction (Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004). Hord (2004) later clarified the attributes as five "dimensions" of PLCs "supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of that learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice" (p. 1). Her work laid the foundation for more constructive approaches in measuring functionality of PLCs.

Communication and Trust

Inadequate collaboration, poor communication, and misguided purposes weaken potentially effective collaboration in PLC settings (Wilson, 2016). Thornton and Cherrington (2014) studied teacher perceptions of PLC and discovered trust facilitated teacher leadership and collective efficacy. Teachers considered collaboration ineffective in the absence of trust in the leader and identified communication as an integral component (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Resentment can occur when teachers believed only a semblance of distributed leadership existed (Wilson, 2016). Sustainable, effective collaboration required consistent nurturing (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014; Gray et al., 2017). Teachers willingly contributed to prescribed causes when the leader displayed genuine concern (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014).

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) asserted teachers' trust in their principal lessens in importance when distributed leadership through shared ownership of the professional learning process is fully operational (p. 483). These findings represent a current, pervasive theme of fragmentation and lays the groundwork for future studies evaluating PLC implementation (Watson, 2014). The findings also illuminated the disconnect between those in leadership positions who organize PLCs and the expectations of participants (Fullan, 2014). Lowery-Moore et al. (2016) identified multiple reform efforts and leaders' reluctance to distribute leadership as inhibiting factors to teacher leadership opportunities. This necessitates including teacher perspectives in future research exploring self-efficacy and leadership (Battersby & Verdi, 2015).

Enabling School Structures

Gray et al. (2017) argued the foundation of an embedded structure supporting and facilitating the PLC process is more important than trust. Gray et al. (2017) evaluated PLCs using the variables: enabling school structures, collegial trust, academic emphasis, and collective

efficacy. The researchers defined enabling school structures (ESS) as those empowering teachers intentionally through systematic and ongoing professional learning opportunities. Findings revealed a combination of the four variables significantly correlated to PLC operations. The variable ESS had a significant effect on the development of PLCs, but others did not. The researchers concluded "enabling school structures act as an antecedent to professional learning communities by establishing and supporting the foundation upon which learning, teaching, collaboration, and trust can be developed" (Gray et al., 2017, p. 6). The work of Gray et al. (2017) illuminated the often-underestimated complexity of PLC interactions and prompted further investigation.

Self-efficacy of Teachers

When considering efficacy in the context of school climate and culture, one goal is to evaluate the level of control teachers believe they have in a collaborative setting outside the classroom (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Teachers with "high efficacy" who champion collaboration and have faith "systems-level change will positively impact student learning and that their contributions to the profession are important and needed" (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009, p. 1). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) conveyed the difficulty in establishing a relationship between self-efficacy and teacher leadership using quantitative methodologies; especially when attempting to evaluate individual efficacy (p. 802). More often than not, the focus is on collective efficacy and not self-efficacy (Ping et al., 2018). Nonetheless, "collective efficacy guides cognitive processing by influencing the interpretation of experiences – that is, by causing individuals to attend to factors that might have been overlooked or to weigh the importance of factors differently" (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to

evaluate self-efficacy in the context of collective efficacy (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Gray et al., 2017).

Collective efficacy also serves as a focus when evaluating PLCs effectiveness (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Bayar, 2014; Gray et al., 2017). Stoll et al. (2006) acknowledged, "PLCs are distinguished by their emphasis on group or collective learning" (p. 234). A focus on the system or the group does not, however, mean that the individual should be ignored (King & Newmann, 2001). As Hall and Hord (1987) stressed, organizations do not change, individuals do. Individual leadership development requires self-efficacy (Gilbert et al., 2018). Schmoker (2004) drew upon the volumes of work pertaining to teachers' professional development to ascertain although collaboration is "neither costly nor time-consuming . . . the contribution such joint work makes to teacher efficacy and professionalism" is undeniable (p. 49). To better understand the abstract concept of self-efficacy, some background is necessary. Self-efficacy is more commonly defined as confidence in one's ability to impact a given situation (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Bandura's (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy

The conceptual framework for this study is Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1997) deduced," Confidence . . . refers to strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about . . . Perceived self-efficacy refers to belief in one's agentive capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment" (p. 382). In his earlier work, Bandura (1977) theorized:

> [self-] efficacy expectations are presumed to influence level of performance by enhancing intensity and persistence of effort" (p. 212), and further explained, when "given the appropriate skills and adequate incentives . . . [these] expectations are a major determinant

of . . . how much effort [people] will expend, and how long they will sustain effort" (p. 194).

Self-efficacy, as constructed by Bandura, is grounded in one's own beliefs of capability. Efficacy is not a characteristic trait, but the power a person believes they have over situations and experiences (Bandura, 2008). Even perceived self-efficacy can impact commitment and confidence (Bandura, 1977).

More recently, Bandura (2008) indicated a "conservative" bias toward efficacy which ignores the "self-limiting costs of underconfidence [sic]" (p. 168). Bandura contended "adaptive functioning requires regulation of effect" on positive or negative perceptions of experiences and events" (p. 167). He encouraged facilitating opportunities to develop self-efficacy and provided four methods of "influence" (pp. 168–169): mastery experiences, social modeling, social persuasion, and physical and emotional status checks. Mastery experiences does not mean one is without failure. In fact, Bandura noted obtaining success through experiences must be challenging to promote self-efficacy. Additionally, witnessing others gain success through mastery experiences (i.e., social modeling) inspires an even greater sense of efficacy. The third suggested method for influencing self-efficacy, social persuasion, is most relative to PLC environments; especially those in mature and highly functioning levels of operation. Bandura described social persuasion in this way:

> Credible persuaders must be knowledgeable and practice what they preach. Effective efficacy builders do more than convey faith in others. They arrange situations for others in ways that bring success and avoid placing them prematurely in situations where they are likely to fail. They encourage judgment of success by self-improvement rather than by triumphs over others (p. 168).

The fourth method addresses what many in educational settings regard critical to the success of any program or initiative: school culture. Bandura discussed the impact of physical and emotional status on efficacy development. Although primarily controlled by individuals, mastery experiences promoting positive self-image nurtured by "credible persuaders" fosters the development of self-efficacy in a collective fashion (Bandura, 2008). In short, "Greater efficacy leads to greater effort and persistence, which leads to better performance, which in turn leads to greater efficacy" (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 234). This suggests an inextricable link between collective efficacy and self-efficacy.

Teacher Efficacy

The first studies pertaining to teacher efficacy were conducted in the 1970s and evolved from the efforts of researchers at the Research and Development Corporation (RAND) who viewed it as "the extent to which teachers believed that they could control the reinforcement of their actions" and if control was or their own making or determined by environmental conditions (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 202). Formulation of their research entailed a review of Rotter's (1966) contention the way an individual reacts to reward or reinforcement is based upon:

> . . . the degree to which the individual perceives that the reward follows from, or is contingent upon, his own behavior or attributes versus the degree to which he feels the reward is controlled by forces outside of himself and may occur independently of his own actions (p. 1).

He summarized "*external control*" as the perception of reinforcement having occurred after "luck, chance, fate, . . . or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding" the individual (Rotter, 1966, p. 1). He continued "*internal control*" is perception reinforcement "is

contingent upon [the individual's] own behavior or . . . relatively permanent characteristics" (p. 1).

RAND researchers used Rotter's (1966) control constructs to design two questions included on a questionnaire submitted to teachers in 20 Los Angeles elementary schools with high minority populations. Responses indicated a strong correlation between student motivation, student performance, and internal control (Armor et al., 1976). Teachers who felt "efficacious" (p. VI) particularly impacted African American students' reading performance and cited such reasons such as the ability to 'get through' to struggling students and "commitment and morale" due to a sense of internal control (p. 52).

The emergence of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory revealed the complexity of the elusive idea of teacher efficacy. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) described self-efficacy as "a future-oriented belief about the level of competence a person expects he or she will display in a given situation" (p. 207, 210). It is "self-perception of competence rather than actual level of competence" (p. 211). The researchers reviewed multiple studies addressing teacher efficacy, beginning with the RAND study, and ending in 1997. Repeatedly, they discovered teachers who believed environmental factors negated teacher autonomy operated in external control mode while "efficacious" (Armor et al., 1976, p. VI) teachers were internally motivated to have a positive impact on school culture (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). However, they warned of the challenges in adequately measuring teacher efficacy and urged "teacher efficacy is "context specific" (p. 227). They advised considering the "effects of context" such as academic versus non-academic courses, school climate and culture, leadership influences, collective efficacy, socioeconomic status of school, school demographics, and even a low sense of efficacy (pp. 220-222).

Holzberger et al. (2013) concurred "self-efficacy differs from other cognate variables, such as self-concept, control, and other expectancy beliefs" and is best evaluated in terms of tasks or situations (p. 774). Based upon their review of existing literature and their own research, they surmised more accurate assessments of teachers' self-efficacy related to educational outcomes require a mixture of student and teacher data across multiple data points (Holzberger et al., 2013). This led them to design a study employing the common practice of teacher self-reporting in combination with student performance data over a period of one year. Few studies pertaining to teachers' self-efficacy are longitudinal and even less evaluated self-efficacy as a "result" of effective practices (Holzberger et al., 2013, p. 776). Participants included 155 German teachers of secondary mathematics and 3,483 ninth grade students assessed first at the conclusion of their freshman year and again at the end of their sophomore year. The researchers used an abbreviated version of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale designed by Schwarzer et al. (1999). Using a four-point scale ranging from disagree to agree, teachers responded to questions pertaining to "job performance; skill development; social interaction with students, parents, and colleagues; and coping with job stress" (Holzberger et al., 2013, p. 777). Three areas rated by teachers included cognitive activation via student engagement, effective classroom management, and individual learning support via teacher-student interaction and feedback. Results indicated statistically significant relationships between self-efficacy beliefs and items on all three sub-scales. Students assessed teachers' instructional quality using the same instrument with slight variations in wording to accommodate for student perspectives. The researchers found "substantive variance in the ratings . . . across teachers relative to differences between students in a class" (p. 778). A cross-sectional analysis, however, supported findings of previous studies (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998) and showed high self-efficacy positively impacts instructional quality (Holzberger et

al., 2013, p. 782). Delving further, the researchers used a cross-lagged panel design (meaning data point one equaled end of grade 9 and data point two equaled end of grade 10) to see if "underlying causal mechanisms" could be determined (p. 782). This led to the conclusion results from the cross-sectional analysis were limitedly supported. However, data remaining strong from the beginning of the study to the end only in the area of effect of teacher self-efficacy on individual learning support. No significant long-term effect of teacher self-efficacy was established regarding students' assessment of instructional quality. The researchers noted this additional finding did not completely negate the earlier determined "causal impact" and attributed it to differences in subject matter requiring changes to instructional practices (p. 782).

Additionally, Holzberger et al. (2013) "considered teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as an outcome of the educational process and asked whether teachers' "instructional quality influences her or his later self-efficacy beliefs" (p. 782). They found teachers actually changed their beliefs about self-efficacy over the yearlong period of the study, including veteran teachers. They reported success is a strong determinant of self-efficacy beliefs, which aligns the work of Bandura (1977, 2008). Teachers considered skillful at activating higher cognition among students at the beginning of the study expressed increased self-efficacy one year later. Yet, the researchers cautioned "diagnostic information" obtained from classroom settings must "be appropriately processed to have an influence on efficacy beliefs" (p. 782). As is evidenced by other research in the field, the construct of teacher efficacy remains difficult to assess using quantitative methodologies (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Social and Emotional Well-Being of Teachers

Fullan (2001) urged not to negate the importance of the individual in providing the most operational route for achieving systemic change. Individuals change systems, acting independently and together, to build "*collective capacity* [sic]" (Fullan, 2001, p. 136). Professional learning "offers meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials, and with colleagues both in and out of teaching" (Little, 1993, p. 138). Additionally, effective collaboration yields job satisfaction and indicates sense of belonging and usefulness (Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). When teachers are "empowered to seek and provide help to their peers" and given "flexibility to modify a practice to fit the needs of students and teachers," meaningful school reform is possible (Klingner, 2004, p. 251).

Owen (2016) measured teachers' social emotional development as impacted by commonly held tenets of PLCs including shared vision, collective responsibility, inquiry method, and distributed leadership. Her research yielded a positive relationship between teacher empowerment and student achievement. Teachers reported working collaboratively to improve student achievement increased leadership opportunities and enhanced self-efficacy. "Mature" PLCS evoke "challenge and communal responsibility" while fostering teacher leadership development (Owen, 2016, p. 404). "Feelings of [teacher] efficacy" strengthen when leadership is shared in a communal setting (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Lowery-Moore et al. (2016) labeled this concept "emotional responsibility" (p. 11).

Vesely et al. (2013) linked efficacy and well-being with emotional intelligence. They argued studying teacher efficacy in isolation as inadequate and "lacking in an acknowledgement of factors such as the demands placed on teachers and how those are met" (p. 74). They asserted

emotional intelligence is comprised of multiple factors and is clearly related to teacher efficacy (p. 76,77). The authors considered how teachers coped with stressful situations within and arising from classroom settings to how they developed and sustained relationships with peers (Vesely et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence is directly related to well-being, which greatly impacts efficacy (Vesely et al., 2013). The authors the work of Brackett et al. (as cited in Vesely et al, 2013) who studied teachers' level of reaction to emotionally challenging circumstances in relation to their levels of tolerance, "management," and "control" (as cited in Vesely, 2013, p. 79). They described much existing professional development in education as already including components of emotional intelligence and suggested a specific focus will yield greater impact on well-being. Finally, they concluded proactively addressing emotional intelligence as a distinct construct expands the potential for better understanding teacher efficacy.

Instructional Leadership within Professional Learning Communities

Much research evaluating PLCs as collaborative entities focuses on student achievement and school culture (Marzano et al., 2005). Few current efforts addressed principals as instructional leaders in PLC settings (Bierly et al., 2016; Fullan, 2014; Ping et al., 2018). This is despite Fullan's (2002) contention nearly 20 years ago:

> the instructional focus must be embedded in a more comprehensive and fundamental set of characteristics… the role of the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the freight of the kinds of reforms that will create the schools we need for the future" (p. 2).

Recent studies highlighted adopted norms and consistent practices as important and emphasized the principal's role in providing teacher leadership opportunities (DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2017; Owen, 2016). Bierly et al. (2016) exposed a lack of accountability

even when teacher leadership roles were assigned. This is due, in part, to the ambiguity of the role of the principal as instructional leader (Guskey, 2014). Klingner (2004) found a primary reason for sustained success of professional learning is "clear expectations from the principal that a practice is important" (p. 251). Teachers indicate a desire for strong leadership in developing norms and maintaining successful structures of PLCs (Graham, 2007; Klinger 2004), but are more forthcoming when speaking of leadership opportunities (DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2017; Owen, 2016).

Critical analysis of PLCs leadership should demonstrate teacher leader development (DeMatthews, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2018; Quin et al., 2015; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Teacher leaders' success correlates positively with leaders' attitudes towards school governance (Quin et al., 2015; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Wilson, 2016). Transformational principals often embrace PLCs as a means of effective collaboration enhancing collective efficacy (Quin et al., 2015). Conversely, conventional leaders often retain ultimate authority and offer limited opportunities for individual growth (DeMatthews, 2014). Those embodying instructional leadership promoting collaboration offer "time, structures and opportunities for continuous learning" (NAESP, 2008). As the literature indicates, substantive research evaluating principals as instructional leaders is needed to understand impacts on professional learning and/or teacher efficacy (Bierly et al., 2016; DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

Reports in the literature are quite clear about the characteristics of academically successful professional learning communities (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; Barton & Stepanek, 2012; Bullough, 2007; DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour, 2004; Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004; Owen, 2016). A primary requirement is collegial participation of the principal (DeMatthews, 2014).

Principals who share leadership through inviting staff input in decision-making foster a shared vision developed from sincere commitment to student learning (DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Gray et al., 2017; Marzano et al., 2005; Sagnak et al., 2015). This commitment should be clearly evident and frequently expressed (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005). Instructional leadership encompasses multiple aspects of collaboration and investments in human capital. Application of commitment to students' and teachers' needs requires visitation and review of each teacher's classroom in continual fashion (GADOE, 2019b). As Kouzes and Posner (2007) noted, leaders "must be models of the behavior they expect of others" (p. 16). Fullan (2002) asserted instructional leadership does not replace organizational leadership; it must be combined with executive and instructional leadership for "continuous" improvement (p. 14). The very nature of PLCs supports principals' involvement as instructional leaders and sustains the clarification, "leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 17).

Essential to a more comprehensive view of instructional leadership within PLC settings is teacher perceptions. Credibility is critical in impacting practices of others; especially as instructional leaders in a PLC setting (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). This is earned through relationship building with followers via "direct involvement and action" to foster mutual respect (Perry, 2010, p. 28). Leaders' attitudes toward school governance determine teacher reactions to professional learning initiatives (Quin et al., 2015; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Collaborative leaders embrace "vision" as "the force that invents the future" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 17) and recognize they must work in collaboration to achieve high standards (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Sagnak et al., 2015). "Leadership is ultimately about the ability to influence others" and learning leaders understand effective communication as essential to designing relevant and meaningful professional learning opportunities (DuFour & Marzano,

2011, p. 3). Further, sharing values "consistent with the aspirations of constituents" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 60) paves the way for motivating others to strive for success. Skillful leaders acknowledge in sustaining commitment to excellence, they must also guide performance both "independently and interdependently" (p. 61). Concurrently, leaders must "forge unity" (p. 65) by "teach[ing] others to model values, while inspiring a shared vision without suppressing dissent" (p. 67). The PLC setting is designed to provide principals with multiple opportunities to foster collective inquiry and skillfully guide the course of school improvement (Bierly et al., 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Chapter Summary

This review of the literature on teachers' self-efficacy in relation to PLCs did not lead to any rich or contemporary findings related to this important topic. Further, the researcher identified a gap in the literature regarding PLCs between the mid 2000s and a resurgence of interest in past few years, especially after the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. Much of the reviewed literature had an emphasis on effective collaboration in PLCs. The role of the principal as instructional leader and collaborative partner also emerged in many studies. There is much literature pertaining to the importance of instructional leadership, but few studies evaluating teachers' perceptions of the principal as instructional leader.

Some studies yielded results consistent with current trends in professional learning in reaction to federal and state legislation regarding the disconnect between expectations leading to misguided results. Overall, there is scant information regarding teacher experiences in PLCs; and much less concerning their views on development of self-efficacy or leadership. This has led to a general misunderstanding of the purpose of PLC effectiveness (Bayar, 2014; Guskey, 2002). As Patton (2002) stated, "qualitative inquiry seems to work best for people with a high tolerance for

ambiguity" (p. 242). Even within the confines of an interpretive qualitative study, it is the hope of this researcher to assist in clarifying the ambiguous constructs of professional learning.

In chapter III, the researcher explained the research design and the process of gathering and analyzing data. In discussing the setting, population and sample was portrayed through demographic data specific to relevant school districts of participating teachers. The researcher also offered the rationale for selecting effectiveness of PLCs as the topic of study. Data analysis was described in detail, along with validity, and potential ethical issues.

Chapter III

Methodology

Although PLCs have become the norm in designing and implementing professional learning opportunities for educators, more recent researchers found little evidence of positive impact on student achievement as a result of teachers' participation in PLCs (Hamilton, 2013; Hardinger, 2013; Nadelson et al., 2012; Varano, 2010). In fact, Hardinger (2013) found a negative relationship between PLC implementation and student achievement in English courses. Burde (2016) administered the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (Oliver, et al., 2010) survey to 275 teachers in 12 middle schools and found no statistically significant relationship between PLC participation and student achievement on Michigan's mandated assessments in math and reading. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy.

In this chapter, I discuss the chosen research design, describe the setting for the study, and detail the process for collection and analysis of data. Additionally, I offer a rationale to explain the chosen data collection analysis and interpretation of data. The primary instrument for gathering data is a semi-structured interview (See Appendix A) consisting of a combination of researcher created questions and selected items from the Vibrant School Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018) (See Appendix B). I explain my role in the process and list the reasons for selection of this issue as the topic for my doctoral dissertation project. Explicit details of study design are included in the methodology, instrumentation, procedures, and data analysis plan sections. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations exhibit my commitment to minimal and limited intrusions upon participants' general well-being.

Statement of the Problem

Educational leaders and researchers have found professional development by local educational agencies, state accountability measures for teachers and leaders, and even federal programs funding mandates do not significantly affect student academic progress in the United States as evidenced by national and international measures of achievement. Data from GOSA revealed an average increase in proficiency of two percent in performance on Georgia's test for accountability, Georgia Milestones, from 2016 to 2019 (GOSA, 2020). Data from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2020) reveal slight increases in student performance on Georgia's test for accountability, Georgia Milestones, from 2017 to 2019. On end of grade assessments, the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency from 2017 to 2018 increased slightly in all areas except science. From 2018 to 2019, a small increase was evident in all subject areas except social studies. When comparing the changes from 2017 to 2018 and 2018 to 2019, students improved at the same rate in Math (with a change of 1% for both), slightly more in English Language Arts and science, but less in social studies. On end of course assessments, the overall increase in all subject areas was higher from 2018 to 2019 than from 2017 to 2018. However, the increase was less significant in economics and United States History (GOSA, 2020).

Purpose Statement

A commonly implemented initiative to improve student performance through teacher collaboration is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). A large body of research focuses on collective efficacy of teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. In this research project, the focus

will be on teachers participating in PLCs at three levels of maturity (Antinluoma et al., 2018):

implementation, emergent, and fully operational. The school at the implementation level will be

one where incorporation of PLCs as a means of improving instructional practices is in year one.

The school at the emergent level will be one where PLCs have been part of the school structure

for at least two years but have not fully developed. The school at the fully operational level will

be one where PLCs are established and functioning sufficiently for three years or more. I

formulated these designations based upon the work of Owen (2016) who found a positive impact

on teachers' efficacy social and emotional well-being because of participation in "mature" PLCs

(p. 404). Additionally, Gray et al. (2017) found school structures to be indicative of willingness

to collaborate in PLCs. Based upon these findings, I used language familiar in many educational

settings to create levels of maturity to better align perspectives within school contexts.

Research Questions

1. What are the life and career experiences of public school teachers in Middle and South

   Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of

   maturity?

2. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in

   Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of

   PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

3. How do public school teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in

   Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of

   PLCs on their instructional practices?

Rationale

"Individuals construct reality in interaction within their social worlds," (Merriam, 2002, p. 37) just as they do in their relationships in the workplace (Covey, 1991; DuFour, 2011; Fullan, 2009; Green, 2000). Qualitative research is "developmental and dynamic in character; the focus is on process as well as outcomes" (Flick, 2014, p. 11). I conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study to gain deeper awareness and understanding of teachers' perspectives and "symbolic interactions" to richly describe the "constructed" implications of experiences within PLCs (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). Few studies pertaining to PLCs are qualitative. This research has the potential to expand knowledge of teachers' perceptions by providing insight only possible through narrative inquiry. A greater understanding of lived experiences within PLC settings, and teachers' perceptions of these experiences, may assist school and district leaders in efficiently designing professional learning opportunities to enhance teacher leadership and self-efficacy.

Because of the inductive nature of PLC observations, semi-structured interviews, and investigation of PLC documents (e.g., calendar, agenda, and minutes), I addressed the "so what," or motivating question, in a manner promoting further discussion (Booth et al., 2016). A goal of mine was to promote interest in *why* it is important to better understand teachers' perceptions of PLC effectiveness. Therefore, I asked interview questions in a semi-structured, exploratory manner in a format designed to allow participants to "reconstruct" PLC experiences and to elicit opportunities for extensions of responses (Seidman, 2013, p. 92).

Research Design

This basic interpretive qualitative study addressed teachers' perceptions of effectiveness of PLCs. Teachers' perceptions are important to school culture (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Fullan, 2002; Gray et al., 2017; Sagnak et al., 2015; Stoll et al., 2006; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). To date, most of the research pertaining to PLCs concentrated only on teachers' views of the impact

of PLC participation on student achievement and school culture in totality. "Just as practitioners learn from the work of scholars with regard to PLC implementation, scholars may learn much from the practitioners who are working to implement PLC concepts in their schools" (Wells & Feun, 2013, p. 234). The practitioners in this study were teachers charged with embedding professional learning into daily instructional practices. In conducting this study, I sought to gather information from teachers' perspectives of opportunities for professional growth, especially with regards to teacher leadership and self-efficacy.

The research questions evolved from the discovery of limited research in the area PLC collaboration in considering the perspective of teachers. Many existing studies focused on how collaboration impacts student achievement. Knowledge acquired in reviewing the literature strengthened the researcher's desire to better understand how teachers view the impact of collaboration in PLC settings. Earlier researchers evaluated teacher leadership from various avenues; even so far as incorporating the role of the individual as professional learner (Bullough, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 1994, 1996; Jackson et al., 2010; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Owen, 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). One of my goals was to allow teachers to evaluate their participation in PLCs to the extent to which it leads to leadership development. There is a need to increase understanding on how teachers perceive self-efficacy versus collective efficacy. Qualitative analysis promotes the possibility of revealing teachers' perceptions of PLC collaboration as giving rise to autonomy.

Setting

I interviewed teachers in four public school districts in Middle and South Georgia from three grade spans: elementary, middle school, and high school. The interviewees were chosen based on recommendations from the school principals. Teachers recommended were chosen for

their knowledge and understanding of the PLC concept. The various districts represent different socio-economics, district size, and location (rural vs. urban) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Using information provided by Middle Georgia RESA, I used interview data to confirm stages of PLC implementation in each school of participating teachers. Schools were classified in three phases: implementation, emerging, and fully operational. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). "Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (Merriam, 1988, p. 48). I established "the most productive relationships" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 99) with those selected in seeking answers to research questions to collect "sufficient variety" (Merriam, 1998, p. 247) and "illuminative" (Patton, 2002, p. 40) responses. The goal was open-minded and candid responses in 'information rich' (Patton, 2002, p. 40) terms of the respondents. For the purpose of this study, I used a pseudonym for each interviewee and the school district the personnel represent.

Population and Sample

The district in which two elementary teachers were interviewed is the Cooper School District. The Cooper School District is situated in an urban setting with varying socio-economic levels. District leadership in Cooper County Schools has actively promoted innovative instructional programs and has encouraged faculty and staff to strive for improvement through implementation of the superintendent's vision for the district.

The Cooper School District has a student population of 25,998 and operates 39 schools, of which 97% are Title 1 schools. All 100% of students classify as economically disadvantaged (GADOE, 2019a). Student demographics are: 73% Black, 17% White, 5% Hispanic, 3% multi-racial, and 2% Asian (GADOE, 2019a). There are 24 elementary schools, eight middle schools,

and seven high schools. The district CCRPI score for 2019 was 68.5, with combined elementary school scores averaging higher at 72 (GADOE, 2019a). The 2019 graduation rate is 85% system wide which represents a dramatic increase over the last five years from an average of 50% (GADOE, 2019a).

Of the more than 57,000 households in the county, the average family income is $38,183 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). In comparison, the national average family income is $61,937 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). The average age of the nearly 154,000 people living in the county is 36 and the median cost of owner-occupied housing is $117,300 (Data USA, 2021). There are approximately 100,000 employed individuals with health care workers comprising the largest portion of those employed followed closely by retail workers (Data USA, 2021). Education professionals, numbering more than 6,700, are the third largest group of employees (Data USA, 2021). The unemployment rate in the county is 3.8% which is lower than both the state of Georgia at 5.6% and the national unemployment rate of 8.1% (USA Facts, 2021). There are three universities, one technical college, and one women's college located in the county.

The middle school teacher interviewed was from the Melton School District. The Melton School District has a student population of 6,598 and operates 8 schools, of which 80% are Title 1 schools in which 27.4% of students classify as economically disadvantaged (GADOE, 2019a). Student demographics are: 24% Black, 70% White, 4% Hispanic, 1% multi-racial, and 0% Asian (GADOE, 2019a). There is one primary school, three elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. The district CCRPI score for 2019 was 82.8%, with combined elementary school scores averaging higher at 85.1% and the 2019 graduation rate is 85.9% system wide (GADOE, 2019a).

Of the more than 17,142 households in the county of district location, the median family income is $41,571 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). In comparison, the state average family income is $58,700 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). The average age of people living in the county is 40.3 and the median cost of owner-occupied housing is $91,900 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). There are approximately 16,005 employed individuals with education professionals, numbering more than 6,700, the largest group of employees (United States Census Reporter, 2021) . Health care workers comprise the second largest portion of those employed. The unemployment rate in the county is 3.5% which is lower than both the state of Georgia at 5.6% and the national unemployment rate of 8.1% (United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics, March 2020). There are remote locations for three universities and one technical college located in the county.

Two teachers interviewed work in the Austin County School District. One is an elementary teacher, the other a high school teacher. The Austin County School District has a student population of 6632 and operates 9 schools and Title 1 funds are used in all district schools through the targeted assistance model (GADOE, 2019a). All students classify as economically disadvantaged and student demographics are 21% Black, 72% White, 3% Hispanic, 2% multi-racial, and 3% Asian (GADOE, 2019a). There are four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district CCRPI score for 2019 was 84.4, with combined elementary school scores averaging higher at 84.9, and the 2019 graduation rate is 90.9% system wide (GADOE, 2019a).

Of the 10,226 households in Austin County, the median family income is $69,280 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). In comparison, the state average family income is $58,700 (United States Census Reporter 2021). The average age of the nearly 29,502 people living in the county is

37.2 and the median cost of owner-occupied housing is $152,800 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). Approximately 87.8% of individuals in the district are employed with management and business workers comprising the largest portion of those employed followed closely by natural resource and construction workers (United States Census Reporter, 2021). The unemployment rate in the county is 2.6%, which is lower than both the state of Georgia at 5.6% and the national unemployment rate of 8.1% (USA Facts, 2021).

The teacher interviewed from the Durham County School District is a high school teacher. The district has a student population of 9,277 and operates 12 schools, none of which qualify as Title I (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2020). In Durham, 25% of students classify as economically disadvantaged and student demographics are 22% Black, 60% White, 9% Hispanic, 8% multi-racial, and 1% Asian (GADOE, 2019a). There are 9 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school. The district CCRPI score for 2019 was 86.4, with combined elementary school scores averaging lower at 82.2 and the 2019 graduation rate is 92.2% system wide (GADOE, 2019a).

Of the 19,338 households in the county of district location, the median family income is $56,951 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). In comparison, the state average family income is $58,700 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). The average age of the nearly 54,666 people living in the county is 32.8 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). The median cost of owner-occupied housing is $165,700 (United States Census Reporter, 2021). Approximately 46.1% of individuals in the district are employed with military base operations comprising the largest portion of those employed followed closely by Durham County School District (United States Census Reporter, 2021). The unemployment rate in the county is 2.6% which is lower than both the state of Georgia at 5.6% and the national unemployment rate of 8.1% (USA Facts, 2021).

Documentation

Documentation is the analysis of participant records or archives by researchers to answer specific research questions (Frey, 2018). Semi-structured interviews helped me analyze "actions and events" within PLCs (Maxwell, 2013, p. 103). In using semi-structured interviews, I hoped to provide a more complete and accurate report.

Interviews

Seidman (2013) asserted an interview is a well-crafted talent and not a skill that can be taught. I conducted semi-structured interviews at a time and location of the participant's choice. I assigned pseudonyms to all participants to protect anonymity of responses. I audio recorded interviews using two electronic devices and used the computer software AudioScribe to transcribe interviews. I reviewed transcriptions for any possible errors in translation. Upon completion of interview transcription and researcher review, I emailed respective transcripts to respondents for revisions and/or clarifications, a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2009).

The first portion of interview questions were created in a manner to maximize participant commentary and limit interruptions (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam; 2002; Patton, 2002). As with observation data, interview data was used to formulate narratives. The intention of extending the data through narrative contexts is accuracy in reporting of findings. I piloted the interview during the fall of 2018 (See Appendix C) and shared the transcript with a research professor at the university where I was earning a doctoral degree. It was approved with no suggested revisions.

In addition to researcher-created interview questions, additional questions were discovered via an internet search following up on the work of a previously cited and prominent quantitative researchers in the field of teacher efficacy, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998, 2001). An email contact was made to survey administrator Davis Clement, Ph.D., Educational Policy, Planning,

and Leadership Department at William & Mary School of Education explaining the nature of my request and for the purpose of gaining permission to use the Vibrant School Scale developed by Tschannen-Moran and Clement (2018). Dr. Clement granted full access with the only condition being sharing the results of my research (See Appendix D). This instrument is administered via survey, but some items can easily be adapted to open-ended response questions. In particular, I used items 3–6, 8, 10, 14, and 19–21. Originally designed to be answered in a yes or no fashion, I simply read them as statements and requested a reaction in the form of reflections of participants' experiences (Seidman, 2013). The Vibrant School Scale includes three subscales, but only the two referred to as "enlivened minds" and "emboldened voice" (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018) succinctly address aspects of teacher efficacy. The scale is a follow up to the Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale which primarily addressed teacher and student interactions (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data Analysis Strategies and Techniques

I collected data using a hybrid and semi-structured interview process. After a few questions at the beginning of interviews to get to know participants, I focused on getting them and encouraged them to use their own words to discuss and describe lived experiences in professional learning community settings. I carefully transitioned between questions to guide in further eliciting honest and reflective responses (Maxwell, 2013). In the second portion of the interview, I posed questions to gain deeper insight into participants' reflections of those lived experiences. During this time, I asked specific questions about efficacy, teacher efficacy, and collective efficacy. For those expressing awareness of efficacy, I posed a follow up question regarding PLCs and collective efficacy. During the final portion of the interview, I read a series of 10 statements

from the Vibrant School Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018) and asked participants to react.

Coding

I engaged in ongoing and inductive analysis of interviews to identify themes and patterns of response through reading, memos, and construction of narrative summaries. I transcribed interviews, read, and reviewed prior to coding, categorizing, and analyzing (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were provisional in nature after initial review to allow emergence of codes (Creswell, 2009) in subsequent readings of transcripts. I developed participant profiles (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013) through the process of reading and rereading interview transcriptions seeking strong feelings or emphasis. I organized interview responses across categories and individuals via matrixes (Maxwell, 2013). I coded interview transcripts according to theoretical categories emerging form the conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016). I collated descriptors to measure frequency (Maxwell, 2013). Recurring themes aided in interpretation of patterns from the views of participants (Creswell, 2009).

Interviews provided a "description of what the participant said" in responding to a question and data were organized as either organizational, substantive, or theoretical (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102). I carefully reviewed responses in a manner to "reflect the person's consciousness" (Seidman, 2013, pg.120) about each statement. While organizational data are more topic centered, emerging sometimes in the forms of expressed and repeated concerns, data categorized as substantive are more inductive in nature, leading the researcher to develop a theory and lessening the chances of discarding potentially influential data (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108). As in other areas of qualitative research, classifying data as theoretical is often based on researcher constructed concepts rather participants' concepts (Maxwell, 2013). While not unacceptable, I conducted an

ongoing and inductive analysis incorporating field notes in memos and reflections to guard against subjectivity. In some instances, it was necessary to create code words for the purpose of connecting on a different level with respondents' words. This is known as open coding and promotes heightened awareness of participant responses (Merriam, 2002).

Validity

A threat to any qualitative study using the interview process is 'reflexivity' (as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p. 125), or "reactivity" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). To minimize my influence and gain the perspective of participants, I avoided leading questions and consistently used memos and reflections to better understand how my actions may have impacted interview respondents. Another concern is researcher bias. Subjectivity is "an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (Peshkin, 1991, p. 285). I guarded against colliding at the "intersection of … subjectivity and … interpretation" by using "reflective awareness" (p. 9). Additionally, I identified subjectivity during the research process (p. 286).

I referred to some in this study as collaborators (e.g., school and district officials, Vibrant School Scale authors, and administrators). I approached participants with respect for their craft. Because of my own bias, I intentionally chose a setting where I had developed only one prior relationship with any school or district personnel as "subjectivity is produced in the process of interactions with others" (Merriam, 2002, p. 300). As the nature of that relationship is professional and this individual was not involved in my actual research study, there was little possibility of bias from any district and/ or school personnel.

Having recently struggled with a negative experience in an educational setting, I can certainly relate to the concept of "fragmented" subjectivity which often predisposes participants to

"bitterness" and unwillingness to openly respond to questions in the highly personalized setting of a face-to-face interview (Merriam, 2002, p. 304). However, I do not view my experience as detrimental to the process as this led to an enlightened disposition towards learning from painful interactions to combat high levels of subjectivity and a heightened sense of "empathic neutrality" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). To construct meaning in experiences with participants, I used self-reflection notes as a continual reminder to earnestly attempt being "guided" (Merriam, 2002, p. 118) through transitioning from description to reduction and, finally, to interpretation (p. 117). Above all, I maintained humility and was "ethically responsive" to participants (Merriam, 2002, p. 313).

Prior to reading Peshkin (1991), I believed subjectivity had no place in qualitative research. Bloom (1996) encouraged "more active engagement with analyzing subjectivity in our interpretive work" (p. 178) than the resulting construct of self-justification when "systematically accounting for subjectivity and reflexively locating oneself" (p. 177). To address this, I used reflection to remain skeptical while preserving the integrity of the process (Maxwell, 2013). Interpretation of human interactions and narratives is a limitation in and of itself. I used "peer debriefing" and "member checks" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 186) as strategies for "mov[ing] toward the unthought" (p. 185). Member checks, also referred to as "respondent validation" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126), occurred in the form of interview transcripts being shared with participants via email. Participants were informed they may offer any changes necessary to ensure accuracy in transcriptions. I also enlisted the services of dissertation committee members and educational professionals for additional review of coded response data in the form of peer debriefing to guard against lessening or discarding negative data (St. Pierre, 1997). However, this was performed in isolation of non-discrepant data to guard against researcher bias. Field notes were reviewed and revisited in the form of researcher's memos and reflections to aid in monitoring subjectivity.

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2013). As validity is "relative" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121), it must be stated I have a positive disposition towards PLCs. This led to the intentional selection of school districts of which I had no personal connection to minimize potential bias. I had not worked in the schools, nor had I visited the schools prior to conducting the study. Additionally, allowing Middle Georgia RESA to assist in selection of schools further removed me from injecting an assessment of maturity levels of PLCs in respective schools based on experiential knowledge.

Validity in qualitative research is "relative" and should be "assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). Therefore, I carefully developed research questions evolving specifically from the reviewed literature and a conceptual framework grounded in the work of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. A combination of researcher created interview questions with the Vibrant School Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018) aided in promoting validity by balancing intent with purpose. Open-ended questions created by me were asked in a matter-of-fact manner so as not to influence or pre-dispose responses in any way. Items from the Vibrant School Scale were read with as little inflection as possible.

Ethical Issues

In accordance with the guidelines of Valdosta State University (VSU) regarding the protection of human participants, I completed the necessary courses through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative to conduct research involving human subjects (See Appendix E) I also sought approval from the VSU Institutional Review Board to interview six participants for

this study (See Appendix F). One district required approval of my research proposal through their

Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability Department (See Appendix G). Principals

in this district received an email requesting recommendations for participants (See Appendix H).

All participants representing the four districts included in this study received an invitation

to participate (See Appendix I) and an informed consent form (See Appendix J) detailing the

intent of the study and the procedures followed during collection of data. Participants also

received an email request for their permission to audio record interviews and were allowed to ask

any relative questions about the process before the actual interview. Every effort was made to

ensure participants fully understood the anticipated level of their involvement in the project and,

if they so desired, could be excused at any time for any reason.

Interviews were conducted at a time and location of the participants' choice. There was no

set time limit for the interviews. One goal of this researcher was to allow participants to describe

lived experiences in PLCs and to elaborate upon their perceptions of these experiences. I

protected participants' anonymity by assigning pseudonyms to refer to individuals throughout the

research process. Additionally, I developed participant profiles (Seidman, 2013) and used an

assigned case number to catalog and analyze transcribed interview data. All data gathered during

the study were secured in a locked filing cabinet with the researcher having sole access. When all

analysis of data was completed, all participant contributions were shredded or deleted as

applicable.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their

perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers'

self-efficacy. The method was a basic interpretive qualitative design. Creswell (2009) described

qualitative research as "emergent" in that "meanings and interpretations are negotiated "through participants'" narratives (p. 195). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gain perspectives of teachers participating in PLCs at three levels of operational maturity. Participants included public school teachers from Middle and South Georgia school districts. The researcher enlisted the help of Middle Georgia RESA in selecting the schools as the RESA worked extensively with the districts and readily identified schools at varying levels of maturity. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six public school teachers in four school districts. I audio recorded the interviews and use computer software to transcribe. I shared interview transcriptions with participants to ensure accuracy. Finally, I analyzed and coded interviews using descriptors to measure frequency of recurring themes. The results of the study are presented in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter IV

Participants

Multiple educational reform initiatives, some influenced by the corporate world, have prompted school and district leaders to seek guidance in creating a culture of collaboration (Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006). The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. The researcher investigated the impact of PLC collaboration on the development of teacher self-efficacy. A basic interpretive qualitative design with descriptive narratives was utilized to provide a more thorough understanding of teachers' perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Bandura's (1977, 1993, 1997, 2008) theory of self-efficacy in relation to self-assurance, incentive, and determination (Bandura, 1977, 1997). This study was guided by three research questions:

RQ 1: What are the life and career experiences of teachers in Middle Georgia and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity?

RQ 2: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

RQ 3: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their instructional practices?

"Phenomenologically based" interviews were used to collect data on teacher perceptions of PLC effectiveness (Seidman, 2013, pp. 15-22). The purpose of this chapter was to present

findings revealed through the interview process. This chapter begins with a review of the research questions. A brief background of participants follows, and demographic characteristics are summarized in table form. Narrative profiles (Seidman, 2013) were used to investigate PLC practices and teachers' perceptions of these practices and for the purpose of placing the words of participants in ". . . context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time" (Seidman, 2006, p. 124).

Background of Participants

A total of six educators from four school systems participated in semi-structured interviews (Patton 2002). The schools and systems were at varying levels maturity in PLC functionality: implementation, emergent, and fully operational (See Table 1). One kindergarten teacher and one high school teacher were interviewed in the system with the highest level of maturity. Two elementary teachers taught in the same system, yet at different schools: while one was in the implementation phase of maturity, the other was in the emergent stage of the process. A middle school teacher taught at a middle school operating in the implementation level of maturity. The final interviewee, a high school teacher, worked in a school operating in the emergent level of maturity.

Table 1

PLC Participation levels of each Interviewee

Participants	Level of PLC Implementation
Pearl	Implementation
Rose	Emergent
Lucy	Implementation
Mia	Fully Operational
Sage	Fully Operational
Dan	Emergent

As the study occurred during the COVID pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams to ensure the safety and well-being of participants. Interviewees were invited to join a meeting through a calendar invitation using Microsoft Outlook. All interviews were recorded through Teams and using the voice memo feature on an iPhone XS and MacBook Pro. Dates and times were of participants' choosing. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The names selected for the participants were Pearl, Rose, Lucy, Mia, Sage, and Dan. Interviews were transcribed using an electronic service and reviewed for accuracy while engaging in multiple viewings of Teams meetings. Once verified as accurate, interview transcripts were emailed to participants for additional scrutiny. All were accepted as wholly reflective of participants' intended responses. Reviews of transcripts by participants served as member checking to ensure reliability and strengthen validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudo Name	Ethnic Group	Age Range	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Education
Sage	CA	40-50	Female	27	Masters
Lucy	CA	20-30	Female	5	Bachelors
Mia	CA	30-40	Female	11	Bachelors
Pearl	AA	30-40	Female	11	Masters
Dan	CA	30-40	Male	14	Specialist
Rose	CA	40-50	Female	19	Masters

Note. AA=African American; CA=Caucasian

Narrative Profiles

Pearl

I chose to call my first participant "Pearl" because opportunities to move forward with my research had seemed rare until I received a response from her over a year after my research proposal defense. Pearl had experienced multiple, highly regarded, immersive, and intensive professional learning endeavors offered by her principal. The interview was conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams due to remaining threats posed to the health of the participant. She was on summer break and chose the afternoon of June 24, 2021, as her interview date. She was in the comfortable surroundings of her own home in a Middle Georgia county. Minus a brief

interruption from her visiting and concerned father, the participant remained fully engaged throughout the conversation.

Pearl is the middle child of three girls. One is five years older and the other two years younger. She acknowledged the perception of middle children and the independent spirit often associated with those born in this birth rank. As was evidenced by her father's coming by to check on her on a late summer afternoon, Pearl's family is closely knit. Off script, she shared they live very near one another and see each other almost daily. She admitted as a child she felt she "lived in the shadows" of her sisters who enjoyed more academic success than she. She "tinkered and created things" and found comfort in crafting. She recalled her parents taking her to Barnes and Nobles on Saturday mornings. While her sisters preferred teen romance novels and the "ever so popular *Encyclopedia Brown* and *Babysitter's Club* series," she sought out books to aid in making "key chains, lanyards, pottery kits and things of that nature."

Pearl also loved playing with her dolls. She vividly described how she and her sisters would have Barbie "marathons" with multiple wardrobe changes, hair styling sessions, and transporting Barbie in her convertible from her mansion to her RV. She added even though many of her toys were "girly and frilly," to provide balance, "daddy made sure we also had RC cars, the latest game systems, bikes, scooters, a basketball goal, baseball gloves, and bats." Talking through the apparent good memories of these times with her sisters led Pearl to remark, "We were well rounded kids."

As she further described the day-to-day activities of her childhood, Pearl imparted she and her sisters were "latch key kids." Her mother's career in property management necessitated a great deal of time and effort in meeting the needs of all interested parties. Her father worked for a railroad company and his duties required him to be "on the road . . . at least a day or two on a

route that took him to Valdosta and back." Pearl did not perceive either of her parents' job responsibilities as detrimental to her and her siblings' upbringing. She understands this time in her life as important to her development as a resourceful and independent individual. Her parents' expectations were ardently understood as is evidenced by her recounting of completing homework and daily chores prior to any playtime with neighborhood friends.

Weekends in Pearl's household were squarely focused on family time. Friday nights began often with Pizza Hut takeout and a trip to Blockbuster for a video followed by a stop for a "sweet treat" to round out their evening. Pearl stated, "We are pretty southern in our upbringing; church on Sundays followed by my sisters and I helping my mom cook . . . a good soul food dinner that included the essential cornbread and sweet tea!" She wanted me to know holidays and birthdays "are important in my family," as well as "celebrating the blessing of life" in general. She added her family embarked upon many day and weekend trips to places such as Savannah, Tybee Island, Stone Mountain, Uncle Remus' Cabin in Eatonton, and multiple trips to Atlanta. This emphasis on togetherness carried over into extended family, as well. Pearl recounted numerous annual family trips to Gatlinburg, Tennessee in the fall where "upwards of 40 family members [traveled from] Middle Georgia . . . in packs of mini vans and SUVs [through the] steep, uneven mountain roads . . . to beautiful chalets that overlooked the Great Smoky Mountains."

At the time of the interview, Pearl was 35 and had completed 11 years of service as an elementary school teacher in the district she attended her entire school career. Thus far, she had taught all core academic subjects in second and third grade. She informed me she would "move up" to fifth grade the coming year to teach English language arts and social studies. She acknowledged, "This is a big move for me, but I'm ready."

Portions of our interview revealed Pearl had not intended to teach elementary school. She shared her first career choice was to be a band director. Pearl said, rather emphatically, "We are a marching band family!" Her father played trombone, her older sister played clarinet and mellophone, and her youngest sister played flute, piccolo, and trumpet. Pearl played the clarinet from an early age, marched in her high school band, and felt she was destined to major in music education and serve in a capacity allowing her to foster the talents of others. In 2004, she continued her "passion for marching band" at Albany State University, a historically Black college and/or university (HBCU).

At some point while earning her degree she realized, "I really didn't know as much about music as I thought I did" and she grew weary of the "amount of extra hours of study and instrument practice it took." She admitted this without sorrow, though, and said she knew she would be an educator regardless and changed her major to early childhood education. She continued, "I had great teachers in my foundational years at an elementary school and a great principal who showed me the possibilities of education and how education can shape your world." She referred to these individuals as "very positive" and their contributions to her life as "the biggest influence" on her decision to become a teacher at the elementary level. She recalled her kindergarten teacher and paraprofessional as the "sweetest and most understanding" and smiled sweetly as she said, "I still think about them to this day." She asserted she still sees her third-grade teacher, who continues to work in the system and often tells her she is proud of her and "always knew [she was] going to be such a great person." She also shared she sees her former elementary principal quite often as she currently serves on the county board of education. She wanted me to know the profound impact she had on her as a "positive" role model. It is clear Pearl holds great respect for these veteran educators.

As we progressed with the interview, Pearl freely offered characteristics of those currently influencing her as an elementary teacher and how they impact her day-to-day decisions regarding how best to instruct her students. One, she referred to as "the guru of ELA [English Language Arts]." Another she said, "really inspires me and pushes me to see . . . the other outcomes, some alternative strategies." Much of this comes, she said, from her lived experiences in PLCs settings. She referred to collaboration in a recent school innovative practice of implementing balanced literacy strategies designed by Jennifer Serravallo, author of the New York Times bestseller *The Reading Strategies Book*. These encounters led her to the realization these experiences were, "very eye-opening in my teacher efficacy and showing me I don't have to always just go down this one avenue. There are many little side streets to go down." Pearl wanted me to understand, "PLCs are important as long as they are strategic . . . and efficient."

As we began to further delve into the topic of PLCs, Pearl provided the following commentary:

> Professional learning in my understanding is the way that educators deepen their knowledge of their content, deepen their professional knowledge. It could be anything from writing more in-depth and more detailed lesson plans to collaborating with your coworkers and teammates and academic coaches. Professional learning is just the push to become better in our profession so that we can continue learning because as we all know, education is ongoing, nothing stays the same.

When asked how the COVID pandemic had shaped and/or changed her views of PLCs, she referred to reactions to "sudden changes" and the need to "flip our whole thinking of how to learn and how to teach." She referred to PLCs as "a class for teachers" and contributed professional

learning experiences to her and fellow teachers' ability to "bring something back and employ [appropriate strategies] into their classroom."

Further into our conversation, Pearl graciously admitted not fully understanding the importance of PLCs until she attended a local university's conference a couple of years ago pertaining to potential teacher candidates. She said this gave her "insight of the importance of . . . learning about PLCs because . . . that wasn't part of [my] coursework in undergrad." She conveyed concern for how new teachers would soon be exposed to something about which they had little to no knowledge. Other responses during the interview revealed a high level of respect for the teaching profession and a genuine concern for the people with whom she works. She spoke of her teacher "sisters" and how graciously they had offered support when her mother became gravely ill the previous fall. She wanted me to know she trusted them completely and, further, there is a true sense of caring and encouragement among her colleagues.

Her responses to other questions specific to PLCs revealed general trust in the process with emphasis on the importance of shared leadership in maintaining commitment to meet instructional needs of all teachers in the building, not necessarily in a universal format and certainly not in whole group settings. She offered, "Delivery methods should change depending upon the content . . . [without] a stagnant check off list . . . to keep the teachers refreshed and wanting to learn more."

She described her current principal as a "strong advocate for building capacity." She explained she specializes in assessing individual professional learning needs to promote teacher efficacy and increase overall effectiveness of daily instructional practices. She iterated "responsibility" is shared among all, but individuals are allowed freedom for personal growth.

Pearl emphasized, "A lot of people may have to go through the micromanaging, but I feel confident, we really don't do that. There's an opportunity for growth for everyone."

Unique to Pearl's interview, she contributed, "I think everyone in the school building should be able to [lead PLCs], from admin even down to the custodians and the lunchroom workers." She added the number of years of teaching service should not be a determining factor, either, and followed this by saying a teacher in their first year of teaching or a teacher close to retirement could be equally qualified to facilitate a PLC.

When posed with a guiding question pertaining to how she would determine true effectiveness of PLCs, Pearl said, "I believe that I would know they are effective because someone can take something back from that experience." She continued, "It could be small little tidbits, a different strategy . . . something . . . to their advantage, then that's a success." She referred to earlier comments she had made about the importance of focusing on needs specific to those of the school to maximize effectiveness of PLCs. She articulated when this course of action is taken, ". . . and presented in a great way, then it impacts the whole building from academic success to behavior success to improving the culture and climate of the school . . . in all areas . . . from the students to the teachers, to the amin, everyone." In expressing her view of who should facilitate the PLC process she said it should be someone with a "slightly higher advantage or maybe an expertise . . . they would like to share." She added she appreciates the "leadership role is like a shared experience" in PLC settings.

There are times, however, Pearl said PLCs are "cumbersome." She recalled such instances from the periods of virtual learning necessitated by the COVID pandemic. While admitting PLCs were "good for collaboration," some attempts, Pearl lamented, ". . . we could have done without and used that opportunity to really hone [sic] in on those things we were really weak in."

Most of Pearl's commentary was positively reflective of PLCs. She repeatedly expressed personal gain from professional learning and her experiences within PLCs. She noted, "I don't think we can do without [PLCs], maybe we can do without [some] of them, but they are important. They are extremely important." She conveyed, "PLCs allow for us to put our guards down a little bit and have those courageous conversations where we may agree to disagree," in a respectful manner.

Rose

I assigned the pseudonym "Rose" to my second participant because of her bold and vibrant personality. I interviewed her on July 20, 2021, at 4:00 p.m. Rose is 42 years old and was just about to begin year 21 of teaching in the school she has taught her entire career. She earned her bachelor's and masters' degrees at private, faith-based colleges in Georgia. As a child, Rose said she was shy, and a "bit overweight" perhaps due to her reported affinity for sweets. She referred to herself as a "meat and potatoes" kind of girl who wanted to fit in with the "cool crowd," but felt she did not due to her lack of self-confidence. When asked what she liked to do as a child, she remarked, "Sleep!" She also said she enjoyed singing and crafting.

Her parents are married and provided a safe and loving home infused with Christian values. Rose learned how to "earn" things through completing chores. Now, she has three stepchildren herself and married her husband when the youngest was five. She affectionately stated, "They're like my children." Her immediate family remains very close to this day. They all live near one another, and a family automotive business provided financial security throughout three generations. In fact, her brother currently resides in the home of her late grandparents, which is located next door to her parents. Both Rose and her brother are in education. He is elementary Headmaster at a local divinity school. She has taught all elementary levels, except second grade,

and has served as special education co-teacher in inclusion classrooms, and regular education teacher in multiple subject areas across various grades.

Admittedly, Rose had no ambitions to be a teacher when deciding her college major. She credits her grandmother as a strong influence in her commitment to the profession. Part of this is because she had mononucleosis (mono) as a child and her grandmother cared for her during this time, making sure she did not fall too far behind in school. Her grandmother was a teacher prior to the time certification was required. It is clear Rose holds her in high regard. She said she was "very, very patient with me" as I am "not the most studious person." Several times throughout the interview, Rose intimated she struggled in school. She said learning came "real naturally" for her brother, but she felt her abilities were somehow impaired; whether actual or self-imposed. She recalled being "grouped" in school based upon ability levels and how this instilled a "passion to help the underdogs" and fuels her "love" for special education.

I conducted my interview with Rose virtually via Microsoft Teams due to remaining threats posed to the health of the participant. Although still on summer break, she was already working at school to prepare to teach fourth grade math and chose the afternoon of July 20, 2021, as her interview date. The school district in which she works takes a very proactive stance on professional learning (PL) and provides multiple opportunities for teachers to engage in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Rose was very forthcoming in her assessment of the district's PL endeavors over the past 20 years. Some she believed were applicable, if only to a few, while others she believed she could wait out and see what would serve as a replacement. She spoke of new attempts at old things, completely throwing out things to begin again, and simple changes to existing practices that were used as accountability measures during observations (e.g.,

how often teachers referred to "learning targets," now learning intentions, during a lesson and the number of "positives" versus "negatives" a teacher uses during a period of classroom instruction).

When asked about her own understanding of PL or PLCs, Rose said, ". . . you're a self-learner, but you also learn from your peers . . . [Professional learning] is best [accomplished] by just sitting down with our peers and talking through it and deciding what is best for the students." She added teacher led PL that is more "hands on" is most appropriate in meeting teachers' needs. She acknowledged timing of PL as critical and stated "PL days" should be the norm as teachers would not be consumed by the duties of a routine day. She asserted PL and PLCs should be relative and specific to the needs of the group and foster "ownership" of solutions-oriented strategizing. She used the example of differentiated instruction to illustrate her point PL must be more interactive as teachers work through a process or scenario to better understand the nature of the expected improvement or change.

Rose expressed she thought the most appropriate role for school administrative leaders in PLCs is as "sounding board for [teachers] to come to the revelation themselves" there is a need for change. Rose continued, ". . . a leader is someone who sets a positive example and leads through inquiry versus telling you what needs to happen." She contended there could be "multiple leaders in a building for different facets [of PL]." To be most effective, Rose said teachers must be "invested" in and "have ownership" of the process if the PL is "really going to create a change." She surmised teacher "autonomy" is positively linked to successful PLCs and effective leaders understand this as a critical element of sustainability.

As our conversation progressed, Rose began to think of learning struggles of teachers in context with students. She said, "Teachers do not want to look like there's any weakness in them." She predicted a downfall of PLCs to be "teachers not wanting to admit" they need help.

She spoke of "personalized learning" for teachers as a plausible method in encouraging teachers to "take a good, deep look at what [they're] doing and the results . . . to determine" individual PL needs. She views teachers getting PL tailored to individual needs as a collective responsibility, whether in a PLC setting or not. She said some school situations do not allow for what she perceives as a true PLC. She cited her own work situation as the only math teacher in the grade she teaches. This makes gathering for a PLC almost impossible except on stand-alone PL days.

Regardless of how collaboration happens, Rose said, ". . . we all have to be responsible for everybody's learning . . ." She conveyed, "That's where a community comes in and your school is your family." She said when teachers do not feel embarrassed to admit they are "really struggling with something" and are able to ask for help without judgement, a PLC is more beneficial. She expressed the need for "talking across the curriculum" and "across grade levels" as essential to PLC success. She asserted single subject area teachers must be allowed to interact and collaborate with other grade level teachers in the same area. She spoke at length about vertical alignment PL and for the need for PLCs to develop clear and actionable goals to improve instructional practices. Her comments indicated a strong desire to further develop this in her school as she perceived this as neglected by current PL and PLC goals and practices. She offered multiple reasons why vertical alignment is a critical need. As her beliefs have been impacted by her experiences, she spoke of numerous scenarios from over the years as evidence. She articulated specific strategies suitable in addressing this need and lamented they are not operational at this point. In attempting to explain her frustration, Rose repeated her thoughts on the impact of teachers' commitment by saying, "I support [PL] because I believe it and I practice it."

In defining efficacy, Rose paused for a long moment, finally saying it is "one of those big school words . . . that could be in simpler form . . . and is not in my vernacular." After a brief

explanation she laughed and said, "Oh. Well, why didn't you just say that?" Prodding, I asked her how she would describe collective efficacy. Rose said, ". . . being confident in . . . using evidence and data that is moving kids' achievement and closing gaps" based upon school and district expectations. She proffered PLCs only impact efficacy if teachers "believe" in PL efforts as they often seem "cyclic" in nature. She explained sometimes what teachers are charged with doing during PLCs is changing something that might "not be most effective, but it's working." She summarized her commentary regarding this portion of the interview by adding teachers need to determine a balance, "of those things you don't believe in and how to make it work the best you can in your classroom and sometimes that means shutting the door and doing what you know is the right thing for your kids."

Her assessment of PLCs was more favorable when she spoke of teachers managing the process, as opposed to leadership mandating learning initiatives and agendas. She used the word "investment" a few times regarding PLC effectiveness. She perceives herself as a "problem solver" and described a situation in which she was impatient to the point of not wanting to sit back and listen to what others recommended. She explained she already knew what to do based upon her many years of experience. She cited this as one example of a teacher not being invested. She admitted to feeling this way on more than a few occasions. She wanted me to understand, however, her passion for excellent classroom instruction has only strengthened over the years. Overall, Rose was politely ambivalent about PL and PLCs impact on teacher efficacy.

Lucy

My interview with "Lucy" occurred on Thursday, August 5, 2021. We began at noon since we were both on a pre-planning schedule the week prior to the start of school. She gave up her lunch time for the interview. I chose this pseudonym for her because her voice reminded me of

my favorite Peanuts character "Lucy" Vanpelt. Additionally, she described herself as a "studious" and "goal-oriented" child. I learned after our interview she is also a serious adult and very dedicated to her career as a teacher.

Lucy was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She moved several times before settling in Dublin, Georgia just before she began school. She attended the county school system until moving in the sixth grade to the city school system. Her parents divorced during her second-grade year, but she said she cannot "remember a time when they were together." Due to the divorce, Lucy frequently traveled to see her mother's family in Missouri and her father's family in North Carolina. She resided with her mother most of her childhood and said she felt being raised by a single mother made her "very independent at an early age." She fondly recalled "church, school, and extracurricular activities" as her "escape." She was a student athlete and cheerleader. She sang in the church choir and enjoyed reading. Her favorite subjects in school were math and science. Family vacations consisted of going to Alaska, Colorado, the Florida Keys, Tennessee, and Disney World.

Lucy is now married, has a three-year-old son, and is expecting another child by the end of the year. She is an avid baker, who really does not care for sweets, but finds joy in appealing to others' tastes, especially her family members. Many off-script comments revealed family is very important to Lucy. She is the first in her immediate family to become a teacher. She did this even though her father told her he would not pay for her to earn a degree in the field of education. He wanted her to fulfill her earlier dream of becoming a pediatrician. As she progressed through her studies, she began to think about patients dying. She began to understand this would be especially difficult for her as her patients would be children. She realized she could not commit to the medical profession with this in mind. She changed her major to math education because she said

she was "really gifted in math" and "fell in love with teaching" as result of her teacher preparation course work. She admitted her father's refusal to assist in funding her college education ". . . made me appreciate my job choice and I don't regret it one bit."

Lucy graduated from a Georgia university with a degree in middle grades education in 2014. She is certified in the areas of science, social studies, and math. She completed student teaching in England and remained there to teach science and math for one year. When asked what inspired her to teach, she responded, "Math and the kids, which is ironic because I don't teach math." She currently teaches eighth grade science at a Middle Georgia middle school. At the time of the interview, Lucy was about to begin her seventh year of teaching. She stated she chose this grade level because they "were my best years in school" and this "made me feel more confident and comfortable in the middle grades setting." She was also inspired by her eighth-grade math teacher who, ironically, was hired to teach science the same year at the same school as Lucy was hired to teach math. Her mentor made it known she preferred to teach the math class, so Lucy graciously switched positions. She said it was beneficial to have her former math teacher teach right across the hall from her. She stated, "She just inspired me, she led me, she taught me how to really focus on my opening and closings of lessons and how important they were."

As I directed our conversation towards Lucy's understanding of PLCs, she said, "I think it's a way for teachers to come together. Really, you never stop learning . . . what you teach and how you teach it because technology increases . . . you're almost playing catch up every single year." She continued, ". . . teachers make PLCs work the best because they're the ones in the classrooms every day . . . digging in depth on the resources in their content areas." Much of her commentary focused on teachers facilitating the PLC process. She acknowledged the importance of the role of an instructional coach as vetting resources for teachers who would, then, present to

others with similar needs and/or wants. She explained once someone has been "out of the classroom more than two or three years" they might be "too far behind to really see what goes on every day." Lucy's remark was not made with a negative tone. She simply reiterated the importance she places on PLCs being structured around meeting specific needs of teachers. She clarified, "When you walk away from a PLC and . . . feel almost quite passionate . . . excited . . . to implement a new strategy," it is a clear indicator of effectiveness. When asked about the impact of PLCs on school culture Lucy said, "It depends on who's leading them . . ."

Lucy demonstrated a lack of awareness sometimes associated with the relationship of efficacy and teaching and learning practices. When I asked how she defines efficacy, she replied, "I have no idea." She continued to grapple with meaning when asked to relate to teacher efficacy or collective efficacy. With the goal of preserving the integrity of her answers, I provided marginal prompts focusing on the semblance between efficacy and autonomy. Given this, Lucy offered, "You have to form the community . . . a bond . . . make it feel like a team effort . . ." She noted the importance of building relationships in which school leaders and teachers take the time to get to know one another. She added teachers in her school receive a great deal of support from their administrative team. She wanted me to understand the importance of students being "first" in connection to professional learning by stating, ". . . it builds a sense of kinship . . . where we don't feel like our egos get in the way of our pride."

Throughout the interview, Lucy appeared positive about her lived experiences within PLCs in her school. Her responses indicated she gains the most when PLCs are led by teachers who have successfully implemented a strategy having meaning and purpose in improving classroom instruction. She even spoke of taking the lead in facilitating a PLC and feeling successful in doing so. According to Lucy, PLCs should be interactive and engaging in nature.

She described unproductive PLCs as teachers receiving information in lecture form and compared this to the ineffective use of such with students. She reflected upon the need of school leadership, especially her principal, to understand the value in putting the needs of students first. In her opinion, professional learning should be linked as much to student needs as teacher needs. She reported she feels "very blessed" to work in a school where teachers and administrators share this mentality.

Lucy told me there was no set schedule in her school or mandated requirements regarding PLC structure. It appears professional learning is initiated when the instructional coach becomes aware of a resource potentially applicable to an identified need, when a teacher learns of a resource deemed appropriate for sharing, or upon request from school or district leadership.

Mia

"Mia" came to the profession of teaching quite differently than most. One of my reasons for choosing this pseudonym is due to her being an only child. The Latin origin of the name means "wished for child." Additionally, Mia is both a practitioner and teacher of dance. I could not help but to relate her personality to Abba's song *Dancing Queen* and the resulting movie and Broadway show "Mama Mia." My interview with Mia has two parts. We began our first interview late in the afternoon on August 20, 2021. In order to participate, she asked someone to teach the school's dance line that afternoon. Nearly 30 minutes into our discussion, Mia received a distressing call. One of the dancers had fainted during practice. The level of care and concern exhibited by her during those moments is a testament to her commitment to her craft and her dedication to the dancers she serves. Thankfully, the young lady regained her strength the following day. This allowed us to complete the interview during the morning of August 21, 2021.

I began with simple questions about Mia's personal history. She was born in southwest Georgia. She is the only child of her still married parents' union but has two half-siblings from her father's first marriage. Her mother earned a bachelor's degree in physical therapy and Mia described her as the "bread winner" of the family. Having entered the work force right after graduating high school, Mia's father managed a local, family-owned hardware store. She said he came from a "super small, rural town and that is just what [people] did" at the time. The difference in her parents' educational journeys allowed Mia to see "a little bit of both worlds . . . the college world . . . versus just the technical side . . . or just the workforce side." However, both parents impressed upon her their desire for her to earn a college degree.

Mia recalled her childhood fondly and discussed her life in a happy and carefree manner. Mia's mother's job required some travel and Mia and her father were able to go with her to New York, New Mexico, and Texas. Additionally, the family visited their condominium at Panama City Beach, Florida whenever possible. Day trips to Atlanta or to landmarks in Georgia and Florida were not unusual. Mia also attended a two-week summer camp for girls each year for several years. She seemed to enjoy traveling as a child and experienced trips with her family as adventures.

Due to the demands of her mother's job, Mia's family often ate meals in restaurants or picked up something at fast food chains. She did not seem to mind this, stating, "I enjoy any kind of food and love to try new things." She fondly recalled the tradition of her dad cooking on Sundays. This seemed to be an important hallmark of her upbringing. She referred to her childhood as "privileged" but said she did not realize this until she went to college. She felt her life was quite normal during her formative years. She described her parents as being "hands-off . . . for the most part." She added they emphasized the "consequences" of making poor decisions

and expressed their desires for her success in a very "matter-of-fact" manner. Mia painted a picture of a tightly knit unit of three who lived harmoniously and afforded one another kindness and grace.

Even with the autonomy granted by her parents, and although reportedly "spoiled" by her grandparents who lived only three miles from her childhood home, Mia said she was "very well-behaved." While she stated she "followed directions well," she admitted to "often push[ing]the limits when given the opportunity." However, she explained no harm had come to her or others because of any of her actions. She attended private school, was "extremely social and talkative, and had tons of groups of friends." Here favorite activities involved being with her friends, riding four-wheelers, and going to her family's farm to explore and work the land. She loved fishing, hunting, and go-karting, enjoying extracurricular activities more than academics. She was active in cheer, dance, theater, and several sports including softball. This led her to be "always on-the-go to different activities."

I asked Mia to provide more details about her school experience given her comments about her private school and asked how it compared to her experiences as a public-school educator. She wanted me to know she had a "very cool [school] upbringing." She described the school she attended from kindergarten through graduation as having a "very specific curriculum," and inspiring "critical thinking," and a place where students were held to "extremely high expectations," yet were given had a great deal of "autonomy as long as [they] could handle it." She even said students who drove were allowed to leave school and return at will. She recalled the general atmosphere of the school as being relaxed; an environment where students were entrusted with the responsibility to manage their freedom appropriately. She said, "We had a senior lounge where we could just chill and hang out . . . We didn't get in trouble for walking

down the hall without a pass." As she recalled her education as "approached much differently" than her current experiences as a high school teacher, she explained, "I think that has really lent itself to the type of person I am today, I'm very well-rounded and I can adapt to pretty much any situation."

The many details provided by Mia about her own experiences as a student indicated she perceives this time of her life without regret. She smiled often and seemed to want to talk more about her experiences. As we moved the discussion into the direction of her college experience, she said, once again, she had been more interested in extracurricular activities than deciding on a major. She devoted most of her time as a member of a competitive dance team. She said she majored in English because she enjoyed the content, but added, "Literally, up until a week before I graduated, I had zero clue what I was going to do with my life." To her surprise and delight, she received a call from a friend who was an elementary dance teacher. She informed her she was leaving and wanted to know if she would like to have the job. She accepted the position and remained there for seven years on a teaching permit. Since there was no certification route via dance, she was not able to earn certification through the Georgia Teacher Alternative Preparation Program (GTAPP). She refers to this time in her career as "stuck in the middle." She was teaching, but not in a content area allowing her to pursue certification. She decided to take off a year to be with her young daughters.

Mia half-jokingly confided the need for health insurance led her back to an educational setting. Initially, she served as a paraprofessional in two different counties. After an 11-year journey and completion of GTAPP, Mia said she now serves as a tenth-grade world literature teacher and dance instructor. While a pay increase was a motivating factor to pursue certification, it was not the driving force. Mia was strongly influenced by a media specialist with whom she

served as her paraprofessional. This person was a veteran teacher of 30 years who served as an instructional support specialist for a brief time before earning certification to become a media specialist. Mia said despite their widely differing years of experience and ages, she and this educator "had the same values as far as education and the same philosophy." She spoke freely of her ability to connect with students in a "direct," yet nurturing manner. The media specialist told Mia one day she wanted to return to the classroom for her final year of service. Mia spoke highly of her observations of the teacher that year. She said she "would go and just sit in her room and watch her teach because she had so much experience and so much love for what she did." Other comments supported Mia's admiration, such as how she used her "passion" for her content to convey students' understanding of difficult texts. Mia said they remain in touch, and she often uses her as a sounding board.

As we moved into the portion of the interview pertaining to PLCs, Mia began to discuss PLC effectiveness by comparing the two school systems where she has worked. In the first, she said PLCs were whole group in nature and focused on school-wide initiatives such as disciplinary strategies and classroom management. Where she currently works, she described highly structured PLCs guided by school norms and expectations determined by annual needs assessments. She reported their focus for this year was improving instructional practices using Hattie's (2008, 2015) research. She often expressed appreciation of the level of involvement of school administrators. She said they are frequently present in various professional learning settings, and often provide "prompting questions" in a shared document to streamline departmental PLC agendas. However, she wanted me to know lead teachers serve as facilitators, managing the weekly process which allows the work to be specific to departmental needs. In continuing her thoughts, she shared she was aware people "loved to roll their eyes" at

professional learning, as she has also done at times, but she said, "I started to see it more of the school system investing in me as a teacher, giving me the opportunity and skills to learn new things and to build my tool belt" of applicable strategies.

The interview with Mia was quite conversational and over the course of two days, we revisited PLC effectiveness. This seemed important to Mia as she spoke frequently of admiration of her school leaders, especially her principal. She contributed the success of PLCs in her school to the principal's commitment and involvement. She stated she thought the practical nature of PLCs in her school allowed teachers to use tools gained in PLCs "to filter out what is effective and what is not going to work . . . in a very seamless way" made them "definitely effective." She conveyed in many responses her confidence in an appropriate balance of direct supervision of the process and teacher autonomy.

As we began the portion of the interview pertaining to efficacy, Mia cited a specific example of her understanding of its meaning. She related this to recent PLC work on the usage of rubrics in the classroom. She said it was interesting to see how different departments interpreted application and relevance to their content. She asserted teacher learning had truly impacted student learning, how this was evident across departments, and how she could perceive a widespread impact of PL. While she did not specifically state this is how she would define efficacy, she used her knowledge and experiences to convey her understanding.

Mia then became vivid in her descriptions of how PLCs impacted school culture. She said, ". . . building relationships . . . is a huge part of our school culture." She spoke of the need for professional "respect" among teachers and perceiving it being developed and maintained through the PLC process. She added, "I think when the teachers are a cohesive unit, then the kids are going to follow suit and understand . . . [we work] collectively. . ." She continued, ". . . when they

see our camaraderie between each other, they tend to have the same feelings and attitudes." She understood PLCs, in her words, as a "way to unify" teachers to "be on the same page."

Returning to questions about her perception of efficacy, Mia now explained, "I think efficacy is just being able to receive information and… to push that information back out. And sometimes back out in a different form." This thought prompted her to further comment, "Teacher efficacy is, to me, making sure that I am delivering correct information and delivering it in an efficient way." She reflected on specific examples of knowledge gained in PLC settings and how, or if, this impacted her instructional practices. Admittedly, she felt some discussions little impact while other suggestions became routine in her planning for instruction. Mia related teacher efficacy to providing optimal instruction through effective instructional strategies, enabling student success at higher levels. For her, the proof of teacher efficacy is when teachers can apply PL in a classroom setting "in a way that the kids can actually do something with it."

For Mia, collective efficacy is more akin to "community efficacy." She compared the work of teachers in a PLC setting to being similar to students working in small, collaborative group settings. Again, she identified the need "to filter out" PL not specific to the needs of the respective group. The theme of purposeful, intentional PLCs pervaded her responses. Repeatedly, she referred to her school leaders as stewards of the process. She described the school's small group PLC structure as beneficial in fostering professional relationships, which help develop a more positive mindset about school improvement efforts. "It's much easier to speak out and feel like you have a voice in a smaller group." As far as her overall assessment of the effectiveness of PLCs and the resulting impact on teacher efficacy, Mia said, "As a new teacher, our PLCs have been, honestly, my saving grace."

Sage

My fifth interview took place on the morning of August 27, 2021. The time was permissible due "Sage's" school being on a virtual learning day. I chose this pseudonym due to her 19 years of service as a teacher and her obvious knowledge of her craft. She earned certification in early childhood education, grades kindergarten through five. She is proud to have served every year of her career as a kindergarten teacher. She currently serves as grade level chair in a department of 13 and credits her principal with recognizing leadership capabilities she did not see in herself. During the interview, Sage admitted to a growing level of self-confidence throughout her life. She affectionately expressed gratitude for the faith her principal placed in her to motivate others while serving with pragmatic integrity. She said her principal's confidence in her "meant the world."

Throughout the first portion of the interview, it became clear Sage has strong ties to her family. Although born in Key West, Florida, Sage was raised in the metro Atlanta area. Her father was originally from South Georgia and grew up with 12 siblings. Her mother was one of three daughters. Her extended family resided in Canada, where Sage and her family visited every two years and treated it as vacation. Her parents met when her father went there to work in tobacco fields during summers of his adolescence. Her father graduated from college, while her mother was a high school graduate. He worked as an accountant for a small firm, and she worked as an administrative assistant for a medical group. Sage said she and her younger brother felt well cared for by their parents who remained married until her mother passed away a decade ago. She admired her parents' work ethic and said they "saved enough money to move up to middle class living." This allowed them to build a lake house about an hour away from her childhood home when Sage was in the fifth grade. She recalled many good memories made by her family at their lake house. It was clear she was sad her parents sold the house sometime during her twenties.

Sage said she grew up "in a family centered home" with "great parents." She said others would describe her as "the quiet child" with friends even teasingly urging her not to talk too much when signing her school yearbook. She continued by saying she was something of a rule following introvert who loved to read so much she would become consumed with a book and could think of little else until she finished. While she said she had friends, Sage referred to her personality at this time in her life as "reserved." She admitted this might have been "a self-confidence thing" and that she "just felt shy and awkward." She stated it was important to mention she began to wear glasses in the fifth grade and had her hair cut to a short length. She wanted me to know there were no external reasons for her feelings and spoke fondly of her childhood neighborhood. She believed she was an appreciated member of a play group she said, "was mostly boys and one girl" who "played sports together . . . rode bicycles and played in the woods." She took dance lessons until seventh grade and began playing the clarinet in sixth grade. She continued through twelfth grade, marching in her high school band.

After graduating high school, Sage attended a Middle Georgia college before transferring to a university in downtown Atlanta. Her original intent was to become a nurse. After listening to college friends who were education majors, she became drawn to teaching in a way she could not deny. To be sure she was making the right decision, Sage became a substitute teacher and worked at a daycare center when she had time. These experiences solidified her resolve to teach. While she had many excellent teachers, she believed her second-grade teacher influenced her more than others to become an educator, even visiting her periodically while at college.

Another important event occurred in Sage's life during her college years. She met her husband, whom she referred to as "fun and outgoing." She believed he helped her become more confident. After the wedding, they moved to Southwest Georgia where she began her career as an

elementary teacher. After six years of teaching, she gave birth to her son and became a stay-at-home mom for five years. She returned to the profession after moving to Maryland, where she taught for three years. Sage and her family moved back to Southwest Georgia after that period. She has been teaching in her current school for the past 10 years and is pleased and proud to be an integral part of the faculty.

Sage seemed at ease in discussing both professional learning (PL) and PLCs. She conveyed a working knowledge of the PLC process and an overall positive attitude about how it functioned in her school. She said, "There's two different ways to look at [PLCs]. Part of it is looking at student work and seeing how you can improve student learning . . . the other aspect [is] . . . teachers are learning different strategies, talking to each other, . . . learning how to grow."

When asked whom she thought should lead PLCs, she spoke extensively of how her principal appoints facilitators to guide the process, but the real work is done by teachers. She said goals stated in the School Improvement Plan guided the process of determining necessary professional learning. While there are times the principal asks various individuals to lead a PLC based on a stated need, teachers routinely set agendas and manage the process. The focus, she emphasized, was not who is "in charge," as teachers have a shared understanding they collaborate to meet common goals. Professional learning secured from outside entities is tailored to meet specialized needs. Agendas are set by school administrators when this occurs. Sage cited the recent necessity of a consultant hired to assist in the implementation of a newly purchased reading program. She also told me of instances when system technology specialists lead PLCs on topics such as digital citizenship and enhancing instruction with web-based communication tools. She spoke of another experience when school leaders ensured a private consultant's PL aligned directly with grade level goals pertaining to reading and writing instruction. According to Sage,

the school's goal is to provide predominantly teacher-led PLCs in small group, highly collaborative settings.

As I shifted our conversation toward PLC effectiveness, Sage became more intent on describing how PLCs impacted her instructional practices. She stated, "If my instruction is improving, then the kids should be improving." She offered an example of recent PL on reading strategies. She described it as personalized to meet the precise needs of kindergarten teachers. Even though the facilitator was outsourced, she was an elementary expert with extensive experience in kindergarten settings. Sage expressed she and her colleagues believe they are overlooked at times and believe most PL addresses the needs of other instructional levels. Experiencing learning intentionally aligned with the needs of kindergarten teachers led her to portray this PLC as "very uplifting." She continued the experience exemplifies the existing structure of a team mentality in her school. Much of her commentary centered around working collaboratively. Sage's statements about PLC effectiveness and its impact on school culture signified an affinity for peer interaction and an open-minded approach to feedback.

Sage struggled initially to articulate understanding of the term efficacy, asking, "Is it a reality?" She pondered a few moments but then said she could not find the words to adequately define the term. Attempting to illicit a more detailed response, I proceeded to my next question about teacher efficacy. She responded with less hesitation this time saying, "I think it's doing the right thing." I prompted her to extend this line of reasoning. She exhibited greater comfort in answering the follow up question regarding collective efficacy by offering, "Working as a team to fulfill the needs of students and teachers." In gaining confidence in her awareness, Sage answered affirmatively when asked if PLCs contribute to the development of efficacy. She spoke of numerous incidences of collaboration. She repeatedly commented about the level of positive

interactions between administrators and teachers. Although not fully confident in her ability to explain efficacy, she spoke frequently of her principal's desire to foster collective efficacy.

Dan

The final interview I conducted for my research took place on Saturday, November 13 at approximately 10:00 a.m. I assigned the pseudonym "Dan" to this participant due to a quote he shared with me from Olympic champion Dan Gable who said, "Once you've wrestled, everything else in life is easy." This sentiment was important to Dan as he was a competitive wrestler in high school and served as a wrestling coach several times over the course of his 14-year teaching career. His full-time responsibilities included serving as an instructional coach and lead English Language Arts teacher in department of 20 in a large Southeast Georgia school system. Dan graduated from a South Georgia university and is certified in the areas of English, Business Education, and Health and Physical Education. He also earned an online teaching endorsement and added a specialist degree in instructional technology.

All of Dan's teaching experience is at the high school level. He began his career in North Georgia. His first teaching assignment was ninth grade English Language Arts. Following this, he taught tenth grade literature and moved up to teach British Literature to twelfth graders. After a change in school systems to accept the position of head wrestling coach, Dan taught business education and led many students to success in earning pathway completions and certification in Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. He also taught computer science, advanced placement computer science, and weight training. Many of Dan's comments, as well as his demeanor in responding, indicated his passion for teaching, learning, and coaching. When asked if someone inspired him to become a teacher he said, "My father obviously had an influence on me, but

several coaches did as well. I had a wrestling coach and a football coach (who was my senior English teacher) that inspired me to teach and coach."

Dan was born in north Georgia but raised in South Georgia. His father is a lifelong educator and spent much of his career in South Georgia, holding roles such as director of student services, principal, assistant principal, teacher, and coach. Dan's father retired from Georgia and currently serves as an assistant superintendent in a large, north Florida school system. Dan's mother stayed at home with him and his two younger brothers until the youngest was of school age. Since then, she has worked for several years as an office manager in a South Georgia school system. She once worked at the middle school Dan and his brothers attended. Dan said he and his brothers were fortunate enough to have her stay home with them during their formative years. Referencing his family Dan smiled and said, "We are all very close."

In explaining his understanding of PLCs, Dan said he believes he is still developing his thought process about the concept. He acknowledged much experience in PLC settings across three different school systems at varying levels of implementation. He spoke of a former principal who led a yearlong implementation designed to alleviate misconceptions and build a foundation for effective collaboration using the PLC model. He said this helped him realize PLCs are about "developing the professional capacities of your staff." Dan shared PLCs function with a high level of fidelity in the school where he currently works. Admittedly, he has a good deal of knowledge about the school as he graduated from there and his father was a former administrator in the system. He explained PL has long been an integral component to student and teacher success. He said he was reminded of this when he returned to teach there a couple of years ago and was required to attend a weeklong, intensive, and immersive PL experience pertaining to all aspects of instructional expectations. Now serving as an instructional coach, Dan is responsible for

designing PL based upon intensive data reviews. He said this has enabled him to view PLCs as a

tool for "what's going to make us better educators and impact teaching and learning."

When asked who should lead PLCs, Dan stated, "I feel like a PLC should be led by your

best teacher" and "definitely not the same person every time." He added the agenda or goal for the

PL session should be the determining factor in selected the right person. He emphasized a need

for uniformed expectations and urged PLCs, "should be organized and streamlined . . . [with] a

certain template that is common throughout the school system." When asked to elaborate on his

views, he suggested there should be a PLC leader to begin the process. He said the leader could

be an administrator or "whoever would be your instructional leader" who would "set a precedent

or set the procedure" for all PLCs to follow. Several of Dan's responses iterated his advocacy of

teachers leading the way in PLCs.

Given Dan's dual roles as instructional coach and lead teacher, I added a couple of

questions pertaining more specifically to instructional leadership. Our conversation turned to the

responsibilities of the principal in PLC settings. Dan did not deter in his now, seemingly,

insistence PLCs should be led by teachers by articulating it is a "lofty goal" to expect the

principal to be "the primary leader in instruction." He emphasized this, listing some of the many

expectations already placed upon school leaders and said, ". . . the primary role of leadership is to

get buy-in." On the original question regarding the role of leadership in PLC settings, not specific

to the principal, Dan had much to say. He offered, "The role of leadership is to clearly

communicate what the PLC is and what it entails . . . to be a motivator . . . to inspire people to

give it a chance . . . [but this] has to be a genuine thing."

At this point in the interview, I directed my questions back to my original script. In

answering how to measure PLC effectiveness, Dan reasoned, "Really, everything that goes in the

PLC should help that teacher improve their ability to teach." Perhaps due to his experience as an instructional coach, he responded in a manner no other participant did in noting the importance of observations (within PLC settings and classroom instructional practices), along with student achievement and teacher evaluation data. He also recommended feedback via short surveys as useful in determining effectiveness and for designing future endeavors.

My next question afforded Dan the opportunity to discuss a time when he was given an opportunity to lead a PLC on implementing digital tools in planning for instruction. He recalled this experience fondly, stating:

> What was great about that is, at the time, I was coaching, and I was teaching, and I think people were able to see a different side of me . . . we built closer relationships . . . [and] grew as a team . . . That part of the PLC process, getting your teachers engaged . . . really builds the community aspect . . . Putting people in teacher leader roles, there's your chance to get to shine or get to help your peers.

He spoke at length about how this one experience led him to collaborate with fellow teachers to initiate a policy change he and the others viewed as detrimental to students' academic success. He said working together in this manner led to more productive PLCs, adding, "We learned about each other . . . I really did learn something in those meetings . . . and I felt like they weren't a waste of time."

Dan's comments allowed me to easily transition to my question about school culture. He quickly said, "I think [PLCs] raise the professionalism of the entire school." Afterwards, he paused for a moment before replying, ". . . once PLC is a team model . . . once everybody starts working together . . . versus . . . in isolation . . . that is only going to strengthen the culture of the school." He added, "I think it plays a huge role." His response regarding efficacy indicated a clear

understanding of the concept. He defined it as, "the ability to set and achieve a goal efficiently and consistently." He described teacher efficacy as "the ability to achieve positive results (success) in the classroom." His comments allowed for a more conversational discussion of teacher efficacy and collective efficacy. He related collective efficacy to school culture, saying it is an extension of successful collaboration, and found in effective PLCs. He referred to collective efficacy as "a culture of successful teachers." He restated earlier commentary about the impact of teachers working as a team and said without this, "The efficacy and the ability to impact student achievement, it's not going to be there if it's not already there. I guess if it was already there, then we wouldn't need PLCs."

When I asked if Dan had anything to add, he stressed the importance of teachers understanding the PLC structure. Multiple times throughout the interview he emphasized the need to differentiate PLCs from policy and procedure gatherings like traditional faculty meetings. He said, "PLCs can serve to build teacher capacity, a sense of community, and a desire for continuous improvement." While overwhelmingly positive about his own experiences in PLC settings, he cautioned against misinformation and encouraged a broad view of instructional leadership.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented demographic information about the six participants in this study. Narrative profiles were included to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' commentary in relation to PLC effectiveness and its impact on teacher efficacy. This "phenomenologically based" (Seidman, 2013) study explored the lived experiences (Given, 2008) within PLC settings and teachers' perceptions of these experiences. Six teachers, five women and one man, with varying levels of education and experience across all grade levels

kindergarten through twelfth, in both urban and rural schools operating at various levels of maturity, agreed to be interviewed. Participants discussed their perceptions of PLC effectiveness and the extent to which it impacted teacher efficacy. Each participant was interviewed and assigned a pseudonym aligned with their personality and experiences. The researcher attempted to capture participants' reality of PLCs through their own words.

Findings and discussion of themes are presented in Chapter V and relative commentary accompanies the discussion. The researcher provides a summary and discussion of each research question in Chapter VI. Additionally, the researcher indicates limitations and implications of the study. Finally, the researcher suggests recommendations for future research in the field of PLCs impact on teacher efficacy.

Chapter V

Results

This study focused on human interactions within PLC settings and how this might influence perceptions and behaviors. Of particular interest was the impact on the development of self-efficacy and instructional practice. The researcher analyzed the words of participants to seek understanding of how lived experiences empowered or incumbered teachers. The purpose of PLCs is to allow teachers to work together regularly in a meaningful and purposeful manner to better meet the needs of students (DuFour, 2004). Creating an organization with an emphasis on developing personal mastery . . . building shared vision, improving team learning . . . will have the protentional . . . [to allow] schools to be more convivial and creative" (Hughes & Kritsonis,

2006, p. 4). Many schools across the U.S. adopted the PLC model to develop and sustain teacher collaboration (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Gray et al., 2017; Marzano et al., 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). In this study, the researcher examined teachers' lived experiences within PLC settings at various levels of maturity. The researcher analyzed the data and discovered four predominant themes. In this chapter, the researcher discusses each theme in relation to self-efficacy, instructional practices, and applicable literature in the field of PLCs. The researcher also included discussion on participants' responses to items from the Vibrant School Scale, which is designed to measure teacher autonomy and sense of value in school settings. The researcher used the following questions to guide this study:

RQ 1: What are the life and career experiences of teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity?

RQ 2: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

RQ 3: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their instructional practices?

The researcher used a basic interpretive qualitative design to "uncover and interpret . . . meanings" of lived experiences in PLCs as "constructed" by participants (Merriam, 2002, p. 39). Research questions were designed to "identify" aspects of PLC collaboration to "understand" phenomena (Maxwell, 2013, p. 77). Interview questions were created to "generate the data" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 77) necessary to "make sense of" participants' experiences within PLCs and "how this perspective inform[ed]" their attitudes (Maxwell, 2013, p. 81). Six educators ranging in

years of experience, certification levels, and teaching assignments, responded affirmatively to an email invitation to participate. Four teachers in two schools were contacted directly by their administrators due to their active and productive participation in PLCs. Two others volunteered after being contacted directly by the researcher at the urging of RESA contacts.

The researcher collected data in three phases: in-depth, semi-structured interviews; researcher memos and reflection; and document analysis. Each participant contributed responses in a virtual interview series adapted from Patton's (2002) semi-structured protocol. The researcher began the questioning process with an opportunity for participants to provide details about their personal history. Most questions pertained to participants' professional experiences in PLCs and how this might impact teacher efficacy and instructional practices. The researcher concluded the interview with a series of statements adapted from a quantitative scale relating to efficacy development.

The researcher created memos and used them to reflect upon data. The researcher developed "connecting strategies" using narrative analysis, and used "categorizing strategies" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105) to develop codes for thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006, 2013) ranging in length from 1 hour to 1 hour and 45 minutes using a semi-structured process (Patton, 2002). The researcher used a list of predetermined questions to guide responses in a manner to illicit thorough discussion. Due to the COVID pandemic, the researcher conducted interviews virtually. Participants described and reflected upon their experiences in PLC settings and considered the extent to which these experiences impacted their self-efficacy.

The researcher recorded interviews as audio visual files and voice memo files. Interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher used an

online software conversion tool to transcribe interviews. The researcher viewed the audio-visual files while comparing to audio recording transcripts multiple times to ensure accuracy and notate participants' reactions while responding. The researcher then analyzed transcripts and coded data relating to research questions, "comparing segments of data with each other within each interview transcript" (Merriam, 2002, p. 45). Subsequently, the researcher analyzed all interviews for themes and concepts and organized across categories and individuals using matrixes (Maxwell, 2013).

"First cut" coding (Patton, 2006, p. 464), also known as open coding (Merriam, 2002) enabled the researcher to begin analysis by notating prevalent words or phrases. Codes developed were those specific to the phenomena under investigation (Merriam, 2002, p. 148) in participants' commentary, but also relevant to the literature. These codes were used to reorganize data into categories to "facilitate comparison between things in the same category" and develop "theoretical concepts" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). Table 3 illustrates an example of open codes used to investigate the broad category of PLC characteristics.

Table 3

Example of Open Codes

Professional Learning Community Characteristics (PLCC)	
Code	Code Description
LF	Leader-Facilitated – Principal or other administrators
TL	Teacher Led
PLCN	PLC Norms
LU	Lack of Understanding
ITL	Impact on Teaching and Learning
IC	Impact on Culture

As "coding is not a precise science" and is more of an "interpretive act," the researcher used descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5) to organize and measure occurrences in responses (Maxwell, 2013). The volume of data collected necessitated the use of descriptors to establish research relationships (Maxwell, 2013). These descriptors helped the researcher make meaning of participants' responses (See Table 4). Using a series of initial questions to get to know participants allowed for the development of the "kind" and "amount" of "rapport" necessary to "ethically gain the information" needed to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 90-91). Video and audio recordings were continually reviewed with constructed transcript memos and reflections to lessen the possibility of subjective analysis.

Table 4

Sample of Initial Descriptive Codes

Commentary	Descriptor
"Our admin is very good at sharing leadership."	Empowerment
"I think for PLC to be effective you have to have ownership."	Autonomy
"I would not survive without my PLC."	Belonging
"You have to form a bond."	Community

Open coding combined with descriptive coding facilitated discovery of patterns occurring at least more than twice in the data (Saldaña, 2016). A second cycle of coding, known as pattern coding, revealed a frequency in lack of understanding of efficacy (See Table 5).

Table 5

Efficacy Understanding Knowledge Gap Pattern

Relative Commentary	Participant

"Efficacy? I have no idea."   Lucy

"That would be one of those big school words that   Rose

I feel like they could put in simpler terms and be more effective."

"Is it a reality? I don't have any clue how to tell it to somebody."   Sage

". . . receiving information and be able to push that . . . back out   Mia
into a different form."

"I think about [efficacy] as efficient."   Pearl

The researcher continued the use of pattern coding to identify four emergent themes. These

themes are further described in Table 6.

Table 6

Example of Theme, Subcategory, and Supporting Commentary Matrix

Theme	Subcategory	Supporting Commentary
Structured Norms	Clear Expectations	"Just tell me what to do." (IR)
		"The job of leadership is to clearly define . . . what we're doing . . . to be a motivator." (ID)
		"The administration needs to be a big part of guiding us and telling us [what they] want from us." (IS)
	Teacher-Led PLCs	PLCs are "set up by our administration but led by us." (IM)
		"I like that leadership is a shared experience." (IP)

	Leader-Facilitated PLCs	Leadership is "kind of our guiding light and plan moving us to what they want us to talk about" in PLCs. (IS)
		"A leader is someone who sets a positive example, leads through inquiry versus telling you what needs to happen." (IR)
Motivating Factors	Collaboration	"We feel empowered." (IP)
		"PLCs are meant to be the place where you can come together . . . teachers make the PLCs work . . . because they're the ones in the classroom every day." (IL)
	Engagement	"I started to see it more of the school system investing in me as a teacher." (IM)
		"I think [PLCs] provides a team. We're definitely a team here." (IS)
School Culture	Relationships	"You have to form a bond." (IL)
		". . . building relationships is such a huge part of our school culture . . . PLC is really a way to unify . . . "(IM)
	Collective Efficacy	"We're always learning, always . . . my principal is a strong advocate for building capacity." (IP)
		"A culture of successful teachers." (ID)
		"Working to fulfill the needs of students and teachers." (IS)
	Teacher Efficacy	"Putting people in teacher-leader roles, there's your chance to get to shine or get to help your peers." (ID)

	". . . making sure I am delivering correct information and delivering it in an efficient way." (IM)
	"I think it's doing the right thing."
Impact on Teaching and Learning	"We are always learning . . . the PLC is something to teach me to be a better and more efficient teacher." (IP)
	"You have to have buy-in and . . . ownership from the staff and it has to be something that is really going to create change." (IR)
	". . . teachers make the PLCs work the best because they're the ones in the classroom every day . . . implementing those ideas." (IL)

Note. IR = Interview with Rose, ID = Interview with Dan, IM = Interview with Mia, IP = Interview with Pearl, IS = Interview with Sage, IL = Interview with Lucy.

Discussion of Themes

Structured Norms

Participants echoed a common desire for clear expectations guided by structured norms for PLCs. All but two participants spoke of the absence of such and described wide variations in PLCs conducted in their school. The others offered disparaging descriptions of PLCs and exhibited a general ambivalence through their responses pertaining to effectiveness. This theme demonstrates a connection to the work of Gray et al. (2017) and Ping et al. (2018) who found a lack of norms led to ineffective PLCs. As such, the theme exemplifies the impact of principals' misunderstanding of duties and responsibilities in promoting effective collaboration in PLC settings as demonstrated by the work of DeMatthews (2014) and Bierly et al. (2016). Additionally, the theme underscores the work of Abadiano & Turner (2004) who discovered a

general lack of knowledge among teachers regarding efficient collaboration. This is primarily due to teachers being alone in completing most of their efforts to improve instructional practices (Klingner, 2004).

Rose has participated in PLCs at her school for several years. She spoke extensively of a general lack of consistency throughout her district in stating:

[Professional learning is] not tailored enough to schools. I don't need what other schools need. Other schools don't need what I need. They have to meet the needs of *their* students . . . There needs to be training and strategies of how to provide the grade level curriculum and the rigor, but meet the kids where they can actually do the work . . . It doesn't need to be 50 different trainings that everybody's required to go.

Other comments by Rose indicated strong feelings pertaining to the usefulness of PLCs. It was clear she had grown impatient with anything she deemed superfluous to her individual needs as a veteran teacher.

Dan remarked, "[PLCs] should be organized and streamlined and there should be a certain template that is common throughout the school system." Without these parameters, he contended teachers lose interest and perceive PLCs as a waste of valuable time. Mia shared her administration does a good job of ensuring everyone clearly understands the goals and expectations of PLCs. She expressed comfort in knowing her principal, assistant principals, and department chairs meet regularly to compile agendas wholly relevant to current initiatives. She described a recent professional learning experience pertaining to reading and writing strategies and the follow up activities designed by the leadership team to facilitate PLC discussions. Multiple times during her interview, she spoke fondly and admiringly of her principal's facilitation of teacher leadership. She said she does not assume control of PLCs and often serves

as a participant alongside her teachers. In every professional learning situation example Mia

provided, there was a solid structure to the process.

Teacher-Led Professional Learning Communities

Within the theme of structured norms, a predominant subcategory was teacher-led PLCs.

Every participant stated PLCs should be led by teachers. While the principal's role was deemed

highly important, as discovered by Graham (2007), all participants expressed trust and support of

leaders as most integral to positive attitudes about PLCs. They agreed the real work of PLCs

should evolve from the needs of teachers and students and not from the desires or whims of

leadership. Their passionate comments, especially pertaining to trust, reflected the findings of

Gray et al. (2017), Thessin and Starr (2011), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), and Wahlstrom

and Louis (2008).

All participants spoke of shared, or distributed, leadership as a driving force behind

successful PLC implementation. The research of Gray et al. (2017), Hord (1997, 2004), Lowery-

Moore et al. (2016), and Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) yielded results mirroring desires of

participants in expressing concerns of being left out of the planning process. Pearl remarked she

perceives leadership as a "shared experience" and added she would expand the opportunity to lead

to anyone who possessed knowledge and skills to do so, including custodial or cafeteria staff.

Late in the interview, she revisited her thoughts and added:

> Our admin is very good at sharing leadership. A lot of people may have to go through
>
> micro-managing, but I feel confident we don't really do that. There's an opportunity for
>
> growth for everyone. . . . Not only do we feel empowered [to take responsibility for our
>
> own learning], but we have support . . . [and] encouragement.

Pearl's commentary in totality revealed immense trust in her principal and great affection for her peers. She did not miss an opportunity to express appreciation for those with whom she works.

Lucy, who teaches in a school where PLCs had once been fully operational but are re-emerging after changes in school and district leadership, believed the instructional coach should conduct classroom observations to identify teachers who exemplified successful implementation of instructional strategies. She added:

> If you are out of the classroom for more than 2 to 3 years, you're almost too far behind to really see what goes on every day . . . I always say if you want a really good person presenting . . . hire a teacher because they're going to get it across in a way where it's exciting, and just in a passionate way.

Lucy's comments often reflected her respect for the teaching profession. She was clearly proud of her role as a classroom teacher. However, it appeared she was far less impressed with the PLC process in her school. During her interview, she was often hesitant and earnestly tried to contribute only positive thoughts. After the interview, she admitted there is work to be done in revitalizing PLC participation and effectiveness at her school.

Sage and Mia were teachers in the same system at the time of the interview, with one at the primary level and the other at the high school level. They emphasized the importance of teachers leading PLCs and shared this was common practice in their system. They asserted PLCs in their district were highly structured with established norms, clear expectations, and assigned roles. They said agendas were constructed via shared electronic documents and often began with discussion prompts as to how teachers can develop instructional strategies using recently acquired professional learning, which was differentiated to meet the specific needs of teachers. Sage explained, due to this sort of ongoing interaction, PLCs served to "improve student learning . . .

[where] teachers are learning different strategies, talking to each other, and learning how to grow." When asked to elaborate upon her thoughts regarding the principal's role in PLCs, she continued, "Basically, well, to remind us of what we need to be working on as a school with the school improvement plan . . . They're kind of a guiding light . . . moving us to what they want us to talk about." Although Sage and Mia were interviewed nearly a month apart, and taught at opposite ends of the educational spectrum, both were highly approving of the PLC process in their respective schools. Both obviously embraced PLCs as integral to school success.

Dan was clear about his thoughts regarding who should lead PLCs. He said, "I feel like a PLC should be led by your best teacher" in the content area of the agenda. He spoke at length about the potential of PLCs to positively impact teacher development. Nearly halfway through his interview he described a time when he was asked to lead a PLC. He remarked repeatedly how the experience positively impacted his immediate relationships with colleagues and his ability to serve as a teacher leader since. He explained:

> I think you could have different folks deliver the content of each PLC meeting. . . that part of the PLC process, getting your teachers engaged, I think really builds the community aspect when it's not just one leader every single time that's delivering. Putting people in teacher leader roles, there's your chance to get to shine or help your peers.

Of all participants, Dan had more experience in PLCs and in a variety of school and district settings. During his interview, he became almost resolute when expressing his views. He staunchly emphasized the need for teacher-led PLCs and further emphasized this as an opportunity to develop teacher leadership.

In her school, where she had taught for nearly 20 years, Rose spoke casually about her principal and with a common-sense attitude about PLCs. She said PLCs should be "teacher-led"

with teachers provided "hands on examples of when [teacher leaders] use it and how they've used it." She continued, ". . . teacher-led [PLCs] . . . leads to ownership and leadership in the school that you need a lot of times." When asked to be more specific about the role of the principal, she remarked, "I think just to guide [teachers] and to be their sounding board for them to come to the revelation themselves of what needs to happen." Rose's school has been served by many principals during her tenure. While she was obviously supportive of her latest leader, even considering her a friend, much of her commentary revolved around teacher-centered PLCs like ones with common planning structures.

Motivating Factors

In commenting on factors motivating collaboration and promoting engagement, participants were emotionally reflective and spoke of PLC experiences in a rather personal manner. This finding aligns with the work of Gray et al. (2017) which revealed impacts of prior knowledge and/or experiences on involvement within PLC settings. Additionally, participants remarked in a manner exemplifying findings of Green (2000) and Senge (1990) whose work with adult learners revealed an intense nature of predispositions with regards to commitment. As described by participants, the level of both involvement and commitment of teachers depends upon leaders skillfully empowering teachers to effectively collaborate with peers, while promoting the development of efficacy. This supports the research of Bierly et al. (2016), Bullough (2007), Quin et al. (2015), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), and Wilson (2016). Finding the right balance, however, can be challenging for leaders, as some participants alluded. Little (1993, 2003) cautioned against a hands-off approach to PLC implementation. While all

participants articulated a desire for strong leadership regarding structure and expectations, all persistently communicated the importance of teacher-led PLCs.

Each participant became more animated when discussing how PLCs affected their ability to grow professionally. It was clear they were not accustomed to expressing opinions about PLCs in such a personal manner. The researcher observed many pauses, sighs, smiles, a bit of wry laughter, and genuine appreciation. Mia admitted a complete change of attitude after only one year of collaboration with her English department colleagues. She said:

> People love to roll their eyes at [professional learning]. I do too . . . but at the same time . . . I started to see it more of the school system investing in me as a teacher, giving me the opportunity and skills to learn new things and to build my tool belt . . . I would not survive without my PLC . . . we value our PLCs . . . I think it's just a testament to our administration and how they handle [PLCs] . . . they really try not to make us do anything that's going to be pointless or worthless.

Not once during Mia's interview did she signify negative thoughts or feelings about the PLC process in her school.

Lucy spoke positively about the leadership in her school. On many occasions, she attempted to link supportive leadership to PLCs as currently practiced. Like Mia, Sage, Pearl, and Rose, she expressed an appreciation for the faith placed in her by her principal. Although she worked in a school where changes in leadership have led to restructuring of PLCs, she was eager to inform me:

> I'm in a school system right now where I have a very supportive administrative staff. I think it's important to add . . . I have a principal [who] always says . . . if I need something, he will buy it . . . whatever I need . . . if it's for the students. I think that's very

important that from the top going down that students are first . . . With that, it builds a

sense of kinship . . . where we don't feel like our egos get in the way of our pride . . . I'm

very blessed.

Following Lucy's expression of appreciation, she revealed a common misconception, albeit a

more traditional view of the PLC structure, in which the instructional coach serves as the

predominate facilitator. She indicated trust and respect for this individual whom she views as

primarily responsible for identifying teachers employing exemplary practices and having them

lead PLCs. She spoke of teachers being able to think creatively when considering PLC agendas.

She expressed she valued the freedom teachers are given to implement innovative strategies and

believed the recognition for doing so motivated teachers to serve as teacher leaders.

Mia's and Lucy's remarks aligned with the findings of Abadiano and Turner (2004),

Barton and Stepanek (2012), DeMatthews (2014), DuFour (2004), Gray et al. (2017), Hord (1997,

2004) and Owen (2016). Their work revealed successful outcomes of PLC collaboration rooted in

teachers' commitment, feelings of self-worth, and ability to envision opportunities for personal

and professional growth.

Sage shed further light on what motivates teachers to participate in PLCs willingly and

effectively in responding to the statement, "In my school, my voice matters." She stated

emphatically, "Definitely yes. I can go to the administration or team leaders, especially admin,

they're open door. I can go in there anytime I want and discuss anything." She added, "If there's

something we're interested in, we're definitely encouraged to explore that." Sage's responses

further echoed the work of Bullough (2007) who asserted building teacher capacity and

motivating teachers in a positive and constructive manner as fundamental roles of PLCs.

While Pearl seemed intrinsically motivated, she conveyed the need to nurture the PLC process with continued support. She spoke highly of her principal as a leader who insightfully developed teachers' strengths through personalized professional development opportunities. She believed this was a way to keep teachers motivated and engaged. She provided specific examples of workshops and conferences she had been encouraged to attend. However, she clarified her stance on the responsibility of individual teachers to act in collaboration with regards to professional learning and the importance of the principal's role in ensuring this occurs. She contributed:

> I think about collaboration [as] where you work together to [develop] a great end product. I had a great experience with collaboration this past year. [We] divided responsibilities to come back and have a great and wonderful product . . . I believe that my principal is a strong advocate for building capacity . . . I really admire her for . . . spreading out that responsibility and building up our team . . . I've been very fortunate to be in a school building where my voice is heard, and it's recognized, and it's acknowledged. Not just my voice, everyone's voice.

Pearl added, "I feel like my voice matters. I feel like my expertise matters. I can see it. I can feel it." As stated earlier, Pearl's articulations of gratitude for her colleagues suggest faith and trust in the PLC process aligned with the work of Owen (2016) and Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) who found a positive impact on teachers' social and emotional well-being and level of self-efficacy as a result of participation in a setting of distributed and democratic leadership.

Having had rather extensive experiences with PLCs in a variety of settings, Dan had much to say about factors motivating PLC participation and effectiveness. He cited lack of organization, absence of guidance and specified expectations, and undefined roles as detrimental to PLC

success. Like others, Dan believed the principal plays a definitive role in effective implementation of the process. He said:

> The job of the leader is to clearly define, 'Hey, here's what we're doing. Here's why it's different. Here's why we need it.' You really have to be a motivator. You have to inspire people to give it a chance. That has to be a genuine thing. The leadership really needs to understand what a PLC is, they need to do their homework. They're going to need to come prepared and ready to roll it out effectively.

To be clear, Dan did not advocate for the principal as a leader of PLC sessions. Like all other participants, he noted the importance of the principal in a supporting role in the literal and figurative sense of the phrase.

School Culture

There are multiple aspects of school culture. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher discovered a heightened intensity in participants' responses when discussing how PLCs impacted school culture. Interviewees spoke in a more personal nature when describing how PLC participation influenced relationships with others in their school. Some even struggled to provide details, as was evident by changes in body language and tone of voice. Nearly all hesitated, pausing to compose their thoughts, as if they had not given much thought to or made connections between PLCs and school culture. While somewhat difficult to compartmentalize, the researcher placed participant commentary into three categories: relationships, collective efficacy, and teacher efficacy.

Relationships

Even though there was no specific question, all participants spoke either directly or indirectly about relationships when discussing PLCs. Pearl affectionately referred to her inner circle at work as her "School Sisters." She shared collaborative efforts in her school allowed her to call upon others in times of need, stating, "I feel like I can turn to anybody in this school for a shoulder to lean on." Rose spoke of the importance of being unashamed to ask for help regardless of degree, certifications, or years of experience. She said, "That's where the community comes in and your school is your family." Lucy remarked she perceives PLCs as "a way for teachers to come together." Sage shared, "[PLCs] provide a team. We're definitely a team." Mia said, "I would not survive without my Professional Learning Community . . . we value our PLCs . . ." Their commentary demonstrated connections to the work of Bullough (2007), Gray et al. (2017), Owen (2016) and the findings of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD] (2000). In specific reference to relationships, Mia added:

> I think for me building relationships is such a huge part of our school culture. I think when teachers are a cohesive unit, then the kids are going to follow suit and understand that we're in charge collectively as a group, but also when they see our camaraderie between each other, then they tend to have the same feelings and attitudes and camaraderie between themselves.

Pearl bravely admitted:

> I feel like PLCs allow, not necessarily for us to step out of our teacher roles, but [to] put our guards down a little bit and have those courageous conversations where we may agree to disagree and we may get in a heated conversation about whatever the topic may be, about our differing opinion. In the end, the professionalism and respect are there.

Dan spoke of a lack of trust between administration and teachers in his current school. This led

him to say once thriving PLCs were now more automatic in nature and had reverted from fully

operational to emergent. He referred to previous experiences in PLC settings in other schools,

recalling:

> … once [the] PLC is a team model, PLCs can serve to build teacher capacity, a sense of
>
> community, and a desire for continuous improvement… Once everybody starts working
>
> together as a team versus in isolation… that is only going to strengthen the culture of the
>
> school. I think it plays a huge role. I can see how the teachers are going to grow closer
>
> together and it's going to break down some walls . . . I think if you leave teachers to their
>
> own devices, obviously they won't work together as a team . . .

In totality, participants' commentary pertaining to relationships coincided with the work of

Abadiano and Turner (2004), Barton and Stepanek (2012), DeMatthews (2014), DuFour (2004),

Gray et al. (2017), Hord (1997, 2004), and Owen (2016).

Collective Efficacy

All participants hesitated to define efficacy at any level. Efficacy is defined as one's

ability to use experiences to improve or enhance performance (Bandura, 2008). A common

assumption was collective efficacy is equivalent to collaboration which supported the work of

Bayar (2014), Battersby and Verdi (2015), and Gray et al. (2017). Pearl used the word,

"collaboration," in her effort to define efficacy. Later in her interview she added, "There have

been plenty of times where we have been given the opportunity to voice our opinions and that you

see your opinion coming to fruition . . . [PLCs] are good for collaboration." Like Pearl, all

participants characterized effective collaboration in terms of empowerment, but also as

inspirational to their daily work, concepts also identified in the research of Wells and Feun (2013).

Lucy struggled with the term efficacy in general. When prompted with guiding clues, she responded in the sentiment of collaboration and togetherness and stated:

> You have to form the community. To me, you have to form a bond . . . I tell our teachers all the time that you have to form a bond with the students, and you have to get to know them . . . Get to know your teachers. First and foremost, make it feel like a team effort whenever you meet. Maybe even do a team building [activity] to build up to that.

Sage, Mia, and Dan incorporated the word "team" in defining collective efficacy. Sage simply offered, "Working as a team to fulfill the needs of students and teachers." Mia contributed many variations of her concept of collective efficacy. She summarized:

> PLC is really a way to unify, and everybody be on the same page . . . getting everybody on the same page, to me, is more valuable. I'm not going to say it's more important than the professional development that you learn, but I think that concept is just super valuable in the school culture and for kids to see teachers also have to work together . . . Not everybody here is going to be my best friend, but in a professional or academic setting, you have to listen to other people's ideas, and you have to respect what they're saying.

Dan referred to team building several times when responding to many of the questions. He described instances in which he had personally benefited from PLC collaboration. He spoke of opportunities to develop teacher leaders arising from efficiently designed PLCs. He defined collective efficacy succinctly as, "A culture of successful leaders." When asked to elaborate, he continued:

. . . if you don't get everyone together and start talking about what is going to make us all

better and what's going to be best for [students] . . . the efficacy and the ability to impact

student achievement, it's not going to be there, if it's not already there . . . [PLCs]

definitely contribute to collective efficacy. I think without them you may not have . . . the

understanding of what a PLC is and why it's so important to develop as a team, [which] is

huge.

Even in the absence of clear understanding of efficacy, participants revealed a shift in mentality

due to participation in PLCs. Holzberger et al. (2013) found similar results by adding the

component of teacher self-reporting when evaluating student outcomes.

Although in very different school settings and with several years between them in

experience, Rose's responses to efficacy-based questions were similar to Lucy's regarding basic

understanding. However, her definition of collective efficacy revealed the commonality of linking

student achievement to PLC discussions. This was articulated in some form by all participants.

After a few humorous attempts, Rose explained her understanding of collective efficacy as, "I

guess, either as a school or district, being confident in what they're doing using evidence and data

that is moving kids' achievement and closing gaps the way they expect it to." Both Rose and

Lucy exhibited uncertainty at times during their interview regarding PLC effectiveness. Even

though PLC implementation is on opposite ends of the spectrum in the two schools, their

comments indicated a loosely structured design for the actual event of a PLC. This allows for

multiple interpretations of expectations which can lead to confusion or disillusionment (Bayar,

2014; Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004)

Most research to date regarding PLCs has been in conjunction with impact on student

achievement (DuFour, 2011; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Guskey, 2007,

2014; Hattie, 2008, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005; Owen, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, 2001). This could, perhaps, have led to the predisposition of participants to relate PLCs to student achievement based on previous experiences. In context, participants' views of collective efficacy aligned with Bandura's (1997) definition and supported the work of Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998, 2001) who identified a connection between collective efficacy and explanations of experiences. Participants' responses to collective efficacy items underscored the importance of considering perceptions as potential barriers to success as aligned with the work of Battersby and Verdi (2015), Fullan (2002), Gray et al. (2017), Sagnak et al. (2015), Stoll et al. (2006), and Wahlstrom and Louis (2008).

<div align="center">**Teacher Efficacy**</div>

The concepts of efficacy and teacher efficacy posed challenges to all participants. Lucy appeared embarrassed when she replied to a request to define efficacy as, "I have no idea." Even when provided with the phrases teacher efficacy and collective efficacy, Lucy flatly remarked, "I still don't know." Rose wrestled with composing her thoughts as well. She said, "I don't really know. I know the term. It is not in my vernacular very often." As she had mentioned autonomy in an earlier response, I suggested a similarity. Upon this, she defined teacher efficacy as:

> Being able to do what I need to do for my students . . . based on data . . . [and] research-
> Based strategies, that I know [are] going to meet the needs of my kids and I have the
> evidence to prove that.

Sage also struggled in explaining her understanding of teacher efficacy. After a few moments of consideration, she said, "Oh, gosh . . . Is it a reality? I don't have any clue how to tell it to somebody . . . I think it's doing the right thing." Lucy's and Rose's remarks and reactions to

efficacy as a concept represented misapprehension. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), revealed similar results, finding understanding linked to situational aspects of school culture.

Dan was more confident in his knowledge of both. He defined efficacy as, "The ability to set and achieve a goal efficiently and consistently." He defined teacher efficacy as, "A teacher's ability to achieve positive results (success) in the classroom." Pearl seemed equally self-assured and responded quickly with these remarks:

Efficacy is the ability or the know-how in a certain situation . . . [such as] if I'm really good, or someone has seen me do something . . . for example, in grammar, [and tells me] I liked the way how you presented this standard. I liked the activities. I love the engagement. I like the assessing of your students in this area. Efficacy is the ability to do something out of the normal, out of the ordinary.

A few minutes later in our conversation, Pearl asked if we could return to the topic of efficacy. In doing so, she added:

. . . when I hear the word efficacy . . . I think about efficient . . .As far as teacher efficacy, a teacher can be efficient and get the job done, but just take it a little step further . . . You're getting the job done, using the strategies, if that doesn't work, then you go back and find something else. All of those things encompass efficacy.

At this point in their interviews, Dan and Pearl described characteristics of emotional intelligence as explained by Vesely et al., 2013. Deemed an overarching factor of success, Brackett et al. (2010) urged examining emotional intelligence as a key component of efficacy development.

When asked to define efficacy, Mia paused for a moment after asking for clarification. Once she composed her thoughts, she said, "I think efficacy is just being able to receive

information and be able to push that information back out and sometimes in a different form."

When I asked her to define teacher efficacy, she replied:

> Teacher efficacy is, to me, making sure I am delivering correct information and
>
> Delivering it in an efficient way . . . that the information is put out accurately and in a
>
> way that the kids can actually do something with it.

Mia then added a twist on the view of efficacy and spoke about what she called community efficacy. She described it in this manner:

> I think it is very similar to when the kids are working in groups or when we're in PLCs
>
> using the information that's given to us to benefit us and to help us and push us to do
>
> better and make us better teachers . . . and really pinpointing exactly what the task is or
>
> exactly what needs to happen and staying on task.

Mia's comments are more reflective of research findings revealing a connection between PLC participation and social and emotional well-being. Lowery-Moore et al., (2016), Owen (2016), and Wahlstrom & Louis (2008) discovered multiple positive effects of sense of community on shared responsibility of school improvement. Throughout her interview, Mia referred to a high level of success in her school's PLC process. Her connection of collaboration to well-being exemplifies the researcher's work.

The disparities in responses pertaining to efficacy illuminated the research of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) whose work revealed an intangible connection to real world experiences within school settings. Even in the absence of clear understanding, all participants in this study described their experiences within PLC settings by including characteristics of efficacy such as effectiveness, accomplishment, worth, and value. All six participants spoke at length of the positive nature of interactions with others, including school leaders, and how this impacted job

satisfaction. This portion of participants' commentary reflected the findings of Bandura (1997), Schmoker (2004), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), and Türkoğlu et al. (2017).

Impact on Teaching and Learning

The word team was used often in participants' attempts to describe effectiveness of the PLC model and impact of experiences on teaching and learning. In one way or another, all participants discussed the need for systemic change extending beyond the PLC to ensure effectiveness. Barton and Stepanek (2012) and Gray et al. (2017) discovered similar findings. While participants grappled with definitive examples of how their own efficacy had been impacted by PLCs, they were better able to describe their work with other teachers, as well as efforts to improve instructional practices. Similar results were reported in Vescio et al.'s (2008) review of 55 studies pertaining to the impact of PLCs on instructional practices and student achievement. All participants emphasized the importance of sustaining commitment, supportive leadership, and results-oriented structures organized for continuous improvement as key elements of successful implementation which aligned with the findings of Battersby and Verdi (2015), Gray et al. (2017), Hord (1997, 2004), and Klinger (2004).

Even though her PLC was in the implementation phase, Pearl informed me PLCs had become engrained in daily instructional practices at her school. She added, "We do different types of PLCs to strengthen our teacher force." She stated:

> Professional learning is just the push to become better in our profession so that we can
> continue learning because as we all know, education is ongoing, nothing stays the same…I
> see it as a class for teachers where the teachers can go out and learn . . . bring something
> back and employ those things in their classrooms . . . If someone can take something back

from [a] PLC and use it to their advantage, then that's a success . . . we're always learning, always learning. In my eyes, the PLC is something to teach me to be a better, efficient teacher.

Remarks Pearl made about school culture were also applicable to the theme impact on teaching and learning. She said:

I think [PLCs] have a great impact as long as we see the need in our building. If the need is sought out and implemented and presented in a great way, then it impacts the whole building from academic success to behavior success, to improving the culture and climate of the school. [PLCs] impact all areas of the school, from the students to the teachers, to the admin, everyone . . . PLCs are important as long as they are strategic . . . I don't think we can do without them, maybe we can do without all of them, but they are important. They are extremely important.

In offering these comments, Pearl exhibited commitment and investment in the success of PLCs in her school.

Mia shared numerous comments about the impact of PLCs on teaching and learning. She said it was important to her administrators all teachers approach daily instruction in a uniformed manner. She wanted me to know this did not mean teachers were not allowed to personalize lessons to fit their teaching style. She clarified the requirement was for all teachers to employ the same daily lesson structure. She discussed the school's adoption of Hattie's (2008, 2015) work pertaining to teacher clarity and student voice. When speaking of how PLCs engaged teachers in the process, she remarked, "I think when you can apply any of the strategies that you learned in PLCs, and do it in a very seamless way, it's definitely effective." She said PLCs were used to

impart knowledge of the process, while common planning allowed teachers to meet expectations for instructional practices.

Like others, Mia also wanted me to understand there were times when something learned in PLCs was not effective. She spoke of the freedom to make those decisions and the resulting empowerment of teachers, as did Dan, Rose, Pearl, and Sage. Mia said, "Sometimes it works for us, and sometimes it doesn't. I think if you can get two or three strategies from a PLC that can apply to your classroom, that's a win to me." Even though she reported not being able to gain something useful happens only occasionally, Mia said:

> I think that having our PLC groups and building those relationships with teachers where I can just run across the hall and [ask for help] and being able to bounce things off each other . . . PLCs have been my saving grace.

Moreover, many other times during the interview, Mia spoke of the ability to collaborate with colleagues to devise instructional strategies most suitable in meeting the needs of students.

Although generally positive, Pearl admitted varying degrees of PLC effectiveness. She conveyed:

> To be honest with you, sometimes I felt like they were cumbersome. Personally, I felt like some of them we could have done without and use that time as an opportunity to really home in on those things we were really weak in. On the other hand, they were good for collaboration.

Pearl's reflection signified the importance of PLC alignment with identified and targeted needs believed relevant by participants.

Dan candidly stated, "I think it's very important to understand the difference between just meeting, where we're going through policies and procedures . . . [and discussing] really what's

going to make us better educators and impact teaching and learning." He asserted the importance

of commitment several times and relayed, "When teachers are engaged, eager to contribute and

collaborate, [and] leave energized, you have effective PLCs." He continued, "[Collaboration]

raises the professionalism of the entire school . . . PLCs can serve to build teacher capacity, a

sense of community, and a desire for continuous improvement." Both Pearl and Dan alluded to

the importance of consistency of expectations and a desire for structured collaboration. Their

commentary coincides with the work of Barton and Stepanek (2012), Leonard and Leonard

(2003), and Thession and Starr (2011) who found a general lack of understanding or know how

regarding collaboration.

      Sage explained her understanding of PLCs as, ". . . teachers . . . learning different

strategies, talking to each other, and learning how to grow." She repeatedly expressed

appreciation for the PLC process in her school. She stated she believed a PLC was most

successful when it, not only improved her instruction, but also increased student achievement.

She said, "We're a team here. We've always been a team. [PLCs] encourage us to . . . [take] time

to work together as a small group and provide feedback to each other." She spoke affectionately

of her peers and wanted me to know her administration was very supportive of teachers'

combined efforts. She said, "If there's something we're interested in, we're definitely encouraged

to explore that." She explained how seriously her team took the ability to approach leadership

with new ideas. Regardless of such liberties, however, she added, "We're just all on the same

level. We're all here for the kids. We just do what we need to do to help those kids out." Sage

repeatedly spoke of a sense of togetherness and belonging in her school. It was clear she wanted

me to know how much she appreciated her leaders' faith in her and the extent to which she valued

the level of trust in her department.

Rose was vocal about what she believed did and did not work in PLC settings. She began by saying, "I think we learn best by just sitting down with our peers and talking through it and deciding what is best for students that we have and the clientele we have at our school." While she expressed appreciation for PLCs in her school, she admitted she and her colleagues had come to realize professional learning in her district was often a continuation of the same. She also had strong opinions as to how PLCs should be conducted. She remarked, "I do not like virtual PL . . . I like in-person and I like being able to work through a scenario." She referred to earlier comments about how difficult it had been to teach elementary-aged children remotely and how it gave her a new appreciation for her own learning experiences. Regardless of the delivery model, however, Rose was adamant about allowing teachers the liberty to decide how to apply professional learning opportunities in their own classrooms. She asserted:

> Figuring out the balance of those things you don't believe in and how to make it work the best you can in your classroom which sometimes means shutting the door and doing what you know is the right thing for your kids . . . that's PL . . . you've got to have that investment there.

This portion of Rose's responses align with the findings of Bullough (2007) whose research yielded a necessary focus on needs of teachers, and not that of improving student achievement.

Since PLC s were fully operational in Rose's school and she had never taught in another school during her 19 years, she easily expressed how important level of commitment was to PLC effectiveness. Like Dan, Sage spoke of her own investment in comparison to other teachers. She spoke generally of the impact on teaching and learning and in the sense of the impact on collaboration. She shared, "I think for a PLC to be effective you have to have buy-in, and you have to have ownership from the staff, and it has to be something that is really going to create a

change." Something unique to her commentary was her statement pertaining to the reluctance of teachers to admit to needing assistance. She said, "I think that's probably what will hold PL back." After a few more comments, she thoughtfully conveyed, "That's where a community comes in, and your school is your family." Rose's insightfulness, most likely due to her many years of service in a highly functioning school, are aligned with the findings of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) whose research connected isolationist practices of traditional education to a detrimental effect on teacher efficacy.

In her seventh year as a teacher, Lucy was optimistic about the potential of PLCs to improve instructional practices and increase student achievement. She spoke with excitement about a new instructional technology tool she learned in a PLC and later incorporated in her own instructional strategies. Even though not wholly successful, she still found value in the experience. She recommended this would be the perfect opportunity to have a follow up PLC to demonstrate the complexities of real-world application in a collegial setting.

Although in a rebuilding phase of PLCs, Lucy said she and her fellow teachers felt comfortable enough to voice opposition to a proposed initiative. She spoke of a recent PLC in which they were tasked with introducing a new curriculum resource for student usage. Afterwards and over the course of a few days, she and others expressed concern regarding the integrity of articles contained within the resource. Through PLCs, she and her colleagues called for thorough evaluation and came to a consensus on what would be appropriate to share with students. Lucy exhibited respect for this progress. She said, "[For] every teacher [with whom] I've worked, students come first." She seemed to realize her own contributions when she added, "We don't feel like our egos get in the way of our pride. If we know we're dropping the ball, we'll pick it up and

figure out the best way to roll with it." Lucy's sharing of this incident revealed hope the PLC process in her school will continue to develop in this manner of productivity.

Vibrant School Scale Responses

During the final portion of the interview, the researcher presented 10 statements (See Table 7) to participants and asked them to respond affirmatively or negatively (See Table 8). Statements were adapted from a quantitative instrument called the Vibrant School Scale and selected from the subscales "enlivened minds" and "emboldened voice" (Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018). Items pertained to teacher creativity, student curiosity, teacher input, and student voice. Teachers were encouraged to elaborate upon their answers. Teacher responses are included in Table 9.

Table 7

Vibrant School Scale Statements

1. I have opportunities here to pursue independent learning.

2. In our school, my voice matters.

3. I feel that I belong here.

4. I know there is someone in this school I can turn to for help.

5. I feel comfortable sharing my opinions with people in this school.

6. In this school, we openly explore controversial issues.

7. We have a lot of fun together here.

8. I feel an abiding sense of trust in this school.

9. I have a voice in decisions that affect me.

10. In our school, we feel empowered to take responsibility for our own learning.

Table 8

Vibrant School Scale Responses

Participants	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pearl	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1
Rose	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1
Lucy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mia	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	1
Sage	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Dan	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1

Note. 1=Yes,   2=No, 3=No and here is why, 4=Yes, let me elaborate

All participants acknowledged the ability pursue independent learning, believed their voice mattered, perceived a sense of belonging, and believed there was someone in their school to whom they could turn for help (items 1-4). All but Dan responded affirmatively to items 5-8 pertaining to comfort sharing opinions, exploring controversial issues, having fun together, and experiencing an abiding sense of trust. All felt positively about items 9 and 10 (having a voice and empowerment to pursue individual learning opportunities) except Dan. Extended responses are included in Table 9.

Table 9

Expanded Vibrant School Scale Responses

Participants	Question Number and Response

Pearl

1. "Oh, yes. I believe that my principal is a strong advocate for building capacity. It's not like the same people who are going on these conferences, she's picking and choosing where the need is or what she sees that she can build. Like you said, efficacy, teacher efficacy. I really admire her for spreading out, spreading out that responsibility and building up our team."

2. "Oh, yes. I believe that in these past, maybe 5 or 6 years, that the shared responsibility of keeping our school and progressing our school further into success is just very evident because we have this embedded PLC daily. We do different types of PLCs to strengthen our teacher force."

3. "I do. I feel like I matter in my school. I feel like my voice matters. I feel like my expertise matters. I can see it; I can feel it. All of that."

4. "I can turn to anybody. I feel like I can turn to anybody in this school for a shoulder to lean on. 'Hey, can you teach me how to do this? I bombed this lesson; can you show me how you did your lesson?' It goes back to those two teachers that I mentioned earlier, just those in particular at this moment, but anybody in my school I feel I can go to for help."

5. "I do. The positive one especially, and I also feel good about sharing my not-so-positive ones, the ones that come with struggling, the ones when the anxiety sits in. It's just good to be able to talk to somebody and help clear my mind and listen to my opinion."

6. "Yes, I think we do. Yes, there have been several instances in a recent past, especially with the racial upset that was going on, the election instances. We really stay on top of that thing. Not to either particularly left or right side, but just to stay current in what's going on around us."

7. "Oh, yes [we have fun]. I don't even want you to finish that question."

8. "I fully trust the people I work with."

Rose

6. "We're in the south. [laughs]. I don't how to say this. We have

not explored the controversial social issues that are coming around the bend, that are headed our direction. I think we do that, mainly, because it's a safe zone not to. Whether we agree or disagree or whatever, it's coming, but we're not there yet, and that's okay. We will address controversial issues in the fact that there might be something that we're asked to do, and we don't agree or find the importance or the value in it."

7. "We do have fun . . . you have to have fun together . . . tonight, we have Book Club . . . Our principal's going to go."

8. "Yes, we do have a sense of trust and if you break our trust, we're probably not going to forgive you for it."

Lucy

7. "I would agree [we have fun]. Not strongly, but I agree."

8. "Strongly agree [I can trust anyone]."

Mia

8. "I know that there are certain people that I can trust as far as an overall collective. I do think that's an issue here for us."

Sage

8. "Yes, definitely, especially when you have that one person [who] is the go to in the administration."

9. "Definitely, yes. I can go the administration or team leaders, especially admin. They're an open door. I can go in there anytime I want and discuss anything."

Dan

8. "Teachers struggle to trust leadership."

10. "[Taking responsibility for our own learning] is the only option."

Chapter Summary

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews of six teachers employed in four school districts in Middle and South Georgia. Three taught at the elementary level, one at the middle school level, and the remaining two at the high school level. Years of teaching experience ranged from 5 to 27. Highest degree level included: 2 bachelors, 3 masters, and 1 specialist. The age range of the participants was mid-twenties to late forties. Content

expertise included kindergarten literacy, elementary science and math, middle school science, and high school English language arts.

The goal of the researcher was to better understand teachers' perceptions of PLCs through lived experiences. In this chapter, the researcher reported four themes revealed from participants' commentary and discussed them in terms of relevant literature. The four deductively derived themes were: structured norms, motivating factors, school culture, and impact on teaching and learning. These themes were prevalent throughout interview data. Sub themes, referred to as categories in this study, were identified as clear expectations, teacher-led PLCs, leader-facilitated PLCs, collaboration, engagement, relationships, collective efficacy, and teacher efficacy. In the final portion of the chapter, the researcher shared participants' responses to the Vibrant School Scale statements. Limitations, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion are discussed in Chapter VI.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to evaluate lived experiences

of teachers in PLC settings within the context of their perceptions of instructional practices and

self-efficacy. Data gathered from participants revealed the following: (1) positive perceptions of

PLC effectiveness in the school functioning at the fully operational level of PLC implementation,

(2) a lack of understanding of self-efficacy in nearly all participants' commentary, and (3) the

belief effective PLCs can and should impact instructional practices. Four themes emerged during

data collection: *Structured Norms, Motivating Factors, School Culture, and Impact on Teaching

and Learning*. In this chapter, I discussed the themes, which were further placed into

subcategories, in relation to the research questions that guided this study. Limitations,

implications, and recommendations are discussed in the remaining portions of the chapter.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the life and career experiences of teachers in Middle and South Georgia

who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity?

RQ 2: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional

Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-

efficacy as teachers?

RQ 3: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional

Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their

instructional practices?

I used a phenomenological approach to identify perceptions of participants. Participants

were selected through purposive sampling with assistance from Middle Georgia RESA experts

and school level principals. All participants eagerly volunteered and offered rich descriptions of their lived experiences in PLCs. Participants' experience in PLCs ranged from 4 years to 15 years. Three participants had taught only in one school system, two had spent most of their careers in one system, and one had served in multiple systems. To promote validity, I used carefully crafted questions during the interview to prompt the recall of experiences and added only requests for expanded responses when pertinent to the study (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam; 2002; Patton, 2002). Additionally, to better evaluate the perspectives of participants, I employed a continual process of reflection through memos (Maxwell, 2013) which were compiled during multiple viewings of recorded interviews over a period of time.

Although in-person interviews were planned, video and audio recordings facilitated the process of reflection due to COVID-19 restrictions. Interview transcripts and narrative profiles were shared with participants for review and commentary via email (Seidman, 2013). All replied with approval and offered no suggested changes. "Peer debriefing" and "member checks" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 186) were incorporated in the researcher's analysis of interview transcripts to enhance strength of validity. This occurred through sharing of transcripts and narrative profiles with colleagues who previously completed qualitative studies. Open codes and descriptive codes revealed emerging patterns which were used to develop themes and subcategories. These themes enabled me to interpret patterns in participants' commentary (Creswell, 2009).

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

To achieve the objectives of this basic interpretive qualitative study, I interviewed six participants to learn about their lived experiences in PLC settings. To determine impact of level of implementation on effectiveness, four schools operating at three phases of maturity were selected: implementation, emergent, and fully operational (Antinluoma et al., 2018). I extended the data

analysis process by devoting Chapter IV to the creation of narrative profiles. Through this process, I used the exact words of participants to describe their experiences within contexts of setting (Seidman, 2013). I added this phase of intense reflection to decipher explicit meaning of participants' responses (Creswell, 2009). Subsequently, I discussed results of the study in Chapter V as they related to recent literature concerning PLCs. In the following section of this final chapter, I discuss findings in the framework of the research questions which guided this study.

RQ 1: What are the life and career experiences of teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity?

Unable to meet with participants in person due to COVID-19 restrictions, I developed interview questions in the fashion of Seidman's (2013) three-interview series. While not optimal, I compacted the series into one interview by incorporating the recommended structure for each. The first research question was designed to elicit responses about participants' life history as it relates to the topic of study. Initial questions to interviewees allowed them to provide details about their personal background, family structure, education, teaching experience and credentials, and current teaching assignment. During this portion of the interview, participants were asked *why* they became a teacher, and not *how* they became a teacher. This posed challenges in data analysis and necessitated several reviews of visual recordings. However, I did ask who or what inspired them to become a teacher, which elicited enlightening responses. Questions from this portion of the interview aligned with the structure of the first of the three interviews as suggested by Seidman (2013).

Participants were candid in honoring my request for personal information. Most seemed to enjoy sharing details of their family life, school life, and who or what inspired them to become a teacher. Only one participant, Dan, has family member who serves as an educator. His father

served at all levels of service from teacher and coach to district administrator in Georgia. At the time of the interview, Dan's father had retired from a Georgia school system and was serving as a district administrator in the state of Florida. Other participants were inspired to teach by former teachers. Pearl said she worked in the district where she attended school. She spoke at length about several teachers who influenced her, especially her third grade teacher whom she still sees and who always tells Pearl how proud she is of her. She shared admiringly, how her former elementary principal now serves on the county board of education. Pearl's comments about her home district suggested she had no desire to teach anywhere else.

Sage spoke of the influence of her second grade teacher but seemed more intrinsically motivated to teach. She admitted considering becoming a nurse early in her life. However, serving as a substitute teacher and working at a daycare facility during college convinced her otherwise. Lucy had always wanted to be a pediatrician and had no intention of becoming a teacher. After losing a nursing care facility patient while completing the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program in her junior year of high school, she realized the impact of the loss was far more than she anticipated and was unwilling to subject herself to the loss of a pediatric patient. She chose to be a math teacher due her identified giftedness in the area and an affection for the content. Rose asserted she never had any desire to teach, either. When asked who or what inspired her to become a teacher, she said, "I ran out of classes to take in college. Honestly, that was it." She admitted her family had expressed she would be a good teacher, so she enrolled in courses to complete certification. As she continued her reflection, she recalled her parents describing her grandmother as a teacher even though she had no certification nor taught in a school setting. As she continued her response, she began to articulate her grandmother's influence on her decision to become a teacher.

Mia entered the teaching profession via the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) program. She attended a small, private school in Southwest Georgia and fondly described her experiences there. She expressed gratitude for the freedom students were afforded to take ownership of their learning process. After high school, she attended university near her home. Unsure about her desired career path, she graduated from college with a degree in English and entered the realm of education as a dance instructor at an elementary school. Since there is no certification transition from dance to classroom teacher, Mia worked on a permit for 7 years before taking a year off to raise her two young daughters. She admitted it did not take her long to realize she "needed insurance," so she returned to the school setting as a paraprofessional in the media center of a local school. At the time of the interview, Mia had recently completed the GaTAPP requirements and was teaching tenth grade literature.

Listening to the stories of the why or how participants became teachers, given their life circumstances prior to making the decision, enabled me to better understand factors that influenced their current perceptions (Given, 2008). This background helped me evaluate participants' expressed knowledge of PLC participation.

The next set of questions were specific to participants' current lived experiences in PLCs. That is, they allowed participants to provide details about present-day opportunities for professional learning. The goal of this portion of the interview was to enable participants to encapsulate experiences in a manner reflecting an accurate and informative description (Seidman, 2013). The themes *Structured Norms* and *Motivating Factors* emerged through analysis of interview data.

Structured Norms

A strong desire for structured PLC norms was expressed by all participants. Their sentiments confirmed the findings of DeMatthews (2014), Gray et al. (2017), and Klinger (2004) whose work revealed persistent expressions of the need for defined goals and expectations and supported the research of DuFour (2004), DuFour and Mattos (2013), and Hord (1997, 2004) who developed and refined PLC structures for the purposes of clarity and consistency. Repeatedly, participants asserted the need for a standardized method of practice in conducting PLCs. Their commentary included discussion of agendas with prescribed goals. Additionally, all participants stated PLC work must align with identified needs of the grade, department, or school respectively. These comments were placed in the subcategory of clear expectations. Participants' interpretations of the negative impact of absence of structure confirmed the findings of Kociurbua (2017) and underscored the contributions of DuFour and Marzano (2011) and Guskey (2014) in developing models for successful PLC implementation.

Although emphatically articulating the need for established guidelines, all participants agreed PLCs should be led by teachers, which is reflected in the work of Graham (2007) and Gray et al. (2017). Consistent with the findings of Antinluoma et al. (2018), underlying most participants' commentary was the need of support from leaders to foster trust in the PLC process and to promote enduring understanding of expectations. The subcategory of teacher-led PLCs was generated through review of participants' explanations of their reasoning for the critical nature of leaders' support. Pearl succinctly clarified, "I don't think [the structure for expectations] should be such a stagnant checkoff list to make sure these things have been taught at each PLC." Rose exhibited discontent with many attempts at professional learning in her school, as most were designed at the district level and implemented in a system-wide manner. She said, "I personally like it when teachers lead it and can give us hands-on examples of when they use it and how

they've used it." She added, while there was nothing inherently wrong with principal-led PLCs, she simply felt teacher-led PLCs were far more effective.

Mia and Sage offered no criticism of the current structure of PLCs in their school system. Mia shared, a common format for the agenda is the use of prompts to initiate conversation about issues specific to the need of the intended audience. She provided a few, very specific examples of the ongoing assessment of needs. In contrast, Lucy described a lack of commitment in designing PLCs to address targeted needs. Topics for PLCs in her school were determined largely at the district level. While PLCs were common practice in Dan's school and district, he spoke of a *one size fits all* design in which teachers were mere recipients and not active participants. Regardless of level of maturity in implementation in their school, participants clearly indicated an almost protective nature of retaining control of the PLC process.

Participants did not negate the significance of the principal as the architect of PLCs. Every participant except Dan spoke highly of their principal, regardless of level of PLC maturity. Dan communicated a general distrust of leadership in his school. Commentary from other participants signified intense feelings regarding level of input in PLC design once goals and expectations were clearly stated by leadership. Pearl shared she did not believe there was a need for a specific connotation of the word facilitator. She asserted this could be anyone with expertise. Rose, Mia, Sage, and Lucy all stated teachers should determine the course of action when designing PLCs but noted the importance of the principal in an encouraging, yet fully informed, role. The abundance of commentary led to the development of the subcategory, *Leader Facilitated PLCs*. Participants' responses reflected the findings of Antinluoma et al. (2018), Bayar (2014), Bierly et al. (2016), Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), DeMatthews (2014), and Gray et al. (2017)

whose work revealed a positive impact on teacher contributions when trust in leadership existed. Thus, leaders deemed supportive, promoted opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Motivating Factors

A commonly understood precept of operative PLCs is collaboration (DuFour, 2004; Guskey, 2002; Hord, 1997, 2004). Feelings of empowerment often foster collaboration (Green, 2000; Senge, 1990). As interviews progressed, I noticed changes in demeanor when participants described perceptions of PLC effectiveness. Through intense review of interview transcripts, and after multiple viewings of visual and audio recordings, I identified the theme *Motivating Factors*. This theme was further reviewed in context of the subcategories of collaboration and engagement. Those who deemed PLCs in their school highly effective expressed stronger feelings of motivation to participate and to do so in a more productive manner. This finding is aligned with the work of Bierly et al. (2016), Bullough (2007), Gray et al. (2017), Quin et al. (2015), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), and Wilson (2016) whose work revealed a strong connection between contributions to the PLC process and maturity level of implementation.

Pearl, Rose, Mia, and Sage spoke of PLCs as inextricably linked to previous and future school improvement endeavors. Although in the implementation phase, Pearl expressed optimism, enthusiasm, and faith in successful PLCs in her school. Lucy reported her school had once been in the fully operational phase, but two superintendent changes in the past 5 years and multiple school level leadership changes across the district in the same period had relegated PLCs back to the implementation phase. As a result, no uniform expectations existed in her district. Dan addressed his hope for a revitalization of PLCs in his district, as they had regressed from fully operation to emergent. He simply stated, "There is no other option" than to participate in PLCs. In

an elaboration on his response, he shared, most teachers view PLC participation as mandatory and dutifully comply regardless of interest or need.

Denoted by participants' reactions and responses, motivation to collaborate and engage was grounded in having a voice in determining a professional learning agenda based on their needs. As Abadiano and Turner (2004), Barton and Stepanek (2012), DeMatthews (2014), DuFour (2004), Gray et al. (2017), Hord (1997, 2004), and Owen (2016) determined, teachers are far more likely to invest in the process when they feel valued.

RQ 2: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their self-efficacy as teachers?

The majority of interview questions, including the 10 statements from the Vibrant School Scale, fall under the realm of Seidman's (2013) suggestions for a third interview. The statements required participants to form an opinion by "reflect[ing] on the meaning" (Seidman, 2006, p. 18) of PLC experiences. The focus of RQ 2 was to obtain perception data regarding self-efficacy development as a result of PLC participation. All but one participant struggled with the concept of efficacy. Dan, who had a variety of PLC experiences in multiple school districts, was most confident in his response and equated it to goal achievement. Lucy stated she had no understanding of the concept. Sage questioned the validity of such a construct and Rose laughingly described efficacy as, "it might as well be foreign." Mia mistakenly described it as the ability to successfully redeliver content. Pearl earnestly tried to define it, even asking for a second attempt later in her interview, and finally compared it to efficiency. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) defined self-efficacy as having more "to do with self-perception of competence rather than actual level of competence (p. 211)." Participants' struggle with the concept of efficacy did not

negate their ability to describe PLC experiences in terms of self-evaluation. Stronger feelings

about PLC effectiveness coincided with greater sense of self-worth. This aligns with findings of

Türkoğlu et al. (2017) who discovered a strong relationship between a high level of efficacy and

job satisfaction.

Yet, a driving force behind this study was to learn more about how teachers perceived

their ability to grow individually within a school setting. Therefore, I referred to this theme as

School Culture.

School Culture

Within the context of culture three subcategories evolved: (1) relationships, (2) collective

efficacy, and (3) teacher efficacy. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Relationships

Pearl spoke candidly of the impact PLCs had on her school's culture but only if teachers

believed they were necessary. She said when teachers perceived PLC topics as relevant to their

current needs, they were more likely to participate in a constructive manner. She added, ". . it

impacts the whole building from academic success to behavior success." Rose was less supportive

of PLC efforts. She noted the lack of time needed for PLC implementation to be truly efficacious.

Throughout her interview, she spoke rather reservedly about any truly positive impact of

participation in PLCs. She continually stated time to prepare for instruction was preferable to her.

Lucy shared Rose's sentiments regarding usefulness of PLCs. She, too, conveyed they must relate

to identified needs of students and teachers. She emphasized the PLC facilitator must be someone

with a vested interest in expected outcomes; otherwise, she felt they would simply be a waste of

time. This aligned with the research of DuFour and Marzano (2011), Guskey (2007), Marzano et

al. (2005), and Vescio et al. (2008) whose work emphasized the need for a positive cultural mindset towards PLC collaboration.

Mia's opinions were quite different than Rose's. Mia viewed PLCs as the core of relationship-building in her school. She provided examples of how teacher collaboration had grown beyond the PLC setting and had become engrained in daily conversations about meeting the needs of students. While she was careful not to state PLCs were less important, she asserted getting teachers on the "same page" was "more valuable" to a positive school culture. Sage spoke in a similar manner about the impact of PLCs on school culture. She used the word "team" and the phrase "small group" to describe her school's process for evaluating efforts and providing "feedback" to one another. Her comments indicated an appreciation for collaboration arising from PLC participation. Although repeatedly hesitant to equate current PLC efforts in his school with success, Dan also articulated a team mentality when referring to best practices. He has served nearly all his career in a high school setting, so he often referred to the traditional isolationist practices of this level. While he did not share the same high regard of PLCs as Mia and Sage, Dan's knowledge and awareness of successful PLC collaboration shaped his impressions of "potentially positive" impacts on school culture. Mia, Sage, and Dan all indicated a desire to contribute to the success of PLCs in their respective schools. The strength of their perceived ability to do so was impacted by their intrinsic motivation, confirming the work of Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998).

Collective Efficacy

Pearl defined collective efficacy as collaboration. In expanding upon her response, she said she believed PLC collaboration was an impetus for improvement. She asserted PLCs allowed for professional development as well as an avenue for sharing teacher expertise. She described

concerted efforts by her principal to practice distributed leadership and to develop opportunities

for teacher growth. Pearl's high regard for her principal, and her positive perception of PLC

implementation, aligned with the work of Bierly et al. (2016), DeMatthews (2014), Quin et al.

(2015), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), and Wilson (2016) who argued teachers' trust in their

principal could serve as an initial impediment to PLC success.

Rose spoke of collective efficacy in terms of "confidence." As a veteran teacher in a

district having implemented the PLC model for several years, she indicated her vast experiences

in PLC settings led her to be more discerning of school-based endeavors. She was rather

whimsical in describing her view of effectiveness. Many times during the interview, Rose

displayed a mild disdain for PLCs. She seemed less interested in discussing efficacy of any kind

and simply stated she felt collaboration was necessary to improve student achievement. Dan was

more insistent that the purpose of PLCs should be improving student achievement. He

commented about the need to review student data in a collaborative fashion to increase student

performance. Developing "professional capacity" Dan said, should be a focus of PLCs. Both

Rose's and Dan's remarks indicated a desire to have PLCs focus on improving student

achievement. Much of the research on PLCs confirms this shared understanding (DuFour, 2011;

DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Guskey, 2007, 2014; Hattie, 2008, 2015;

Marzano et al., 2005; Owen, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018; Tschannen-Moran et al.,

1998, 2001).

Sage emphatically stated her understanding of collective efficacy as, "Working as a team

to fulfill the needs of the students and teachers," echoing all other participants in frequently using

the term *team*. Rose, Mia, and Lucy used the word "community" to describe their understanding

of collective efficacy. Lucy extended her response and contended the importance of a "bond"

between PLC members. All three struggled to define collective efficacy without prompting. While Pearl and Dan were more confident in their ability to define collective efficacy, they still did not offer concrete knowledge of the concept. Participants' collective commentary aligned with the findings of Gray et al. (2017) who found previous understanding and experiences as a distinctive determinants of PLC participation.

Teacher Efficacy

Even though participants wrestled with the meaning of collective efficacy, they were able to formulate some sense of understanding due the inclusion of the adjective *collective*. Many of the words used pertained to togetherness or shared approaches. When asked how they defined efficacy, all participants stumbled and required strategic prompting to prevent influencing responses. Due to this, the researcher found it essential to allow participants to consider efficacy and teacher efficacy in the framework of collective efficacy. This was similar to the work of Battersby and Verdi (2015) and Gray et al. (2017) whose research revealed teachers commonly link collective efficacy to collaboration. All but one participant defined efficacy in terms of responsibility. Lucy was simply unable to define it. Sage assigned a value judgment when she stated efficacy was "doing the right thing." She conveyed the importance of putting students' needs first. In the follow-up question about collective efficacy, she added, "efficacy [was] doing what was best for students *and* teachers." Pearl summed up her understanding as, ". . . getting the job done, using the strategies, trying again, if that doesn't work, then you go back and find something else." All participants articulated an almost mechanistic view of efficacy focused more on completing tasks than enabling empowerment. Pearl used the term "efficient" when she asked to revisit the concept later in her interview. However, she still spoke in terms of assignments or tasks. While not completely off topic, participants' responses signified a need for clarification.

This supported the work of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) who determined an inability to realize positive contributions to the process of improvement as efficacy.

RQ 3: How do teachers in Middle and South Georgia who participate in Professional Learning Communities at various levels of maturity perceive the effects of PLCs on their instructional practices?

The focus of RQ3 was to obtain perception data pertaining to how participants understood the impact of PLC participation on instructional practices. Woven into much of the participants' commentary was the persistent theme of impact on teaching and learning. All participants spoke at length about how PLC collaboration affected school improvement or student achievement yet were less secure in their ability to determine the impact on instructional practices in their own classroom. This supported the notion that PLC design is more focused on collective efficacy than teacher efficacy (Guskey, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006).

Participants spoke about the application of PLC skills. All clearly believed knowledge gained in PLC settings must be practical and relevant to pertinent, identified needs. This is supported by the work of Battersby and Verdi (2015), DuFour and Marzano (2011), and Owen (2016) who discovered stronger commitment among teachers when PLC efforts are linked directly to improving student achievement and/or enhancing school culture. Rose shared, "you're a self-learner, but you also learn from your peers." Comments pertaining to RQ3 were contributed in a more generalized fashion. Like the others, Pearl mentioned strategies as a consistent topic of PLCs. Rose referred negatively to PLC topics as "a cyclic thing," meaning the same few had been recycled over her years at the school. All participants provided examples of strategies designed to enhance planning for instruction, differentiate instruction for diverse learners, elicit student voice, more accurately assess learning and comprehension, etc. Again, this denoted a PLC structure

concentrated on school improvement and student achievement. As Guskey (2007), Marzano et al. (2005), DuFour, (2011), DuFour and Marzano (2011), DuFour and Mattos (2013), and Tschannen-Moran and Clement (2018) noted, this has been and remains common practice.

Clear PLC expectations were well defined in the school existing in the mature (i.e., fully operational) stage of PLC implementation. The importance of setting expectations is argued by Antinluoma et al. (2018) who studied PLCs at three levels of maturity. Additionally, at schools in the mature stage, PLC topics were more aligned specifically with grade and/or department needs. The highest level of functionality was in the district where Sage and Mia taught at the time of the interview. The same degree of intent and purpose was evident at both the kindergarten level and the high school level. Both Sage and Mia spoke in detail and with appreciation for current and past PLC endeavors. They shared multiple instances during which administrators provided ongoing support and continuous feedback. Their combined commentary was indicative of importance of the principal as an invested partner in PLC success, which was touted by Quin et al. (2015), Thornton and Cherrington (2014), Wahlstrom and Louis (2008), and Wilson, 2016). Sage's and Mia's vivid descriptions of PLCs in their district exemplified components of fully operational PLCs recommended by Klinger (2004), DuFour et al. (2016), Guskey (2014), and the NJCLD (2000).

Pearl, Rose, Lucy, and Dan were only able to speak of PLCs in terms of schoolwide implementation, in which the district often determined PLC topics. No participant discussed professional learning opportunities as a way to develop self-efficacy. Nor were personalized opportunities mentioned. However, improving student achievement was cited many times as a goal of PLCs. The same structure, emphasizing efforts to expand instructional practices based on assessment data, was noted by many practitioners in the field (DuFour, 2011; DuFour & Marzano,

2011; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Guskey, 2007, 2014; Hattie, 2008, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005; Owen, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Clement, 2018; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, 2001). Other factors influenced participants' perceptions of the impact of PLCs on teaching and learning. Veteran teachers had a more casual, less judgmental view of PLCs. Newer teachers viewed PLCs as necessary. Teachers with advanced degrees spoke of PLCs in terms of best practices. Elementary certified teachers accepted PLCs as an important process in meeting the needs of students and teachers, while secondary teachers stressed the need for content specific initiatives. And all participants signified an ambiguous understanding of the purpose of PLCs in the absence of uniformity and consistency, even when integrated as a regular procedure to impart professional learning.

Schools and districts often struggle to meet the individual needs of teachers due to increasing demands for engaging and rigorous instruction (Bayer, 2014). Pearl's, Rose's, Lucy's, and Dan's descriptions of existing PLC structures in their schools were representative of this struggle. No participant shared awareness of prominent researchers in the field of PLC design, but all shared knowledge of researchers and practitioners in the field of teaching and learning. This implied a disconnect between defined goals and desired outcomes. DuFour and Marzano (2011) found such a situation wholly detrimental to successful implementation of PLCs. As Abadiano and Turner (2004) noted, many teachers simply do not know how to collaborate, and this lack of understanding is often overlooked. Further, participants' remarks indicated difficulty in accurately assessing PLC effectiveness due to varying interpretations of the PLC model, a phenomenon that was highlighted by Antinluoma et al. (2018), Bullough (2007), and Downey (2016).

Implications of the Study

This basic interpretative qualitative study was designed to examine the lived experiences of teachers participating in PLCs. The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of PLCs on participants' self-efficacy development and impact of professional learning within the PLC setting on their instructional practices. The premise for the selected topic of study was a perceived lack of research pertaining to individual teacher development because of PLC participation. This was confirmed by a thorough review of the literature. Therefore, the primary implication of this study is that the findings may serve as a precursor for future research in the area of PLCs and self-efficacy. Expanding the discussion of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory within the context of PLCs could increase opportunities for more thorough assessment of impact on teacher development.

Implications to Teachers

Although not the original intent of the researcher, interviewing participants with experience in elementary, middle, and high schools provided greater scope in measuring effectiveness of PLCs. Additionally, 6 perspectives were gained from 4 school districts in Middle and South Georgia. Further, classifying schools at various maturity levels of implementation extended discussion of findings with regards to efficacy. The implications to teachers are embedded within all 4 themes emerging from data analysis but are most readily identifiable in the themes of *School Culture* and *Impact on Teaching and Learning*. Even in the school with the highest level of maturity, teachers did not convey extensive knowledge of purpose. No participants were able to relate PLC participation to impact on personal development and all struggled with the concept of efficacy in any context. This implied a disconnect between components vital to PLC effectiveness and a shared understanding of desired outcomes.

A critical aspect of successful PLCs is a thorough understanding of collaboration among teachers (Antinluoma et al., 2018). As in the work of Abadiano and Turner (2004), teachers in this study indicated a misstep in building such a foundation. Collaboration was described as an afterthought, rather than as an active facilitator of the process. Participants mentioned collaboration as an expectation without explanation and appeared personally affected by their own inability to elaborate understanding in a positive way. Thession and Starr (2011) explained differentiation for teachers is just as necessary as it is for students, yet is often neglected, which can lead to dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement. Participants in this study indicated their PLCs had an absence of differentiation, implying a need to evaluate individual needs of teachers prior to PLC implementation.

Much of the research pertaining to PLC effectiveness focuses on improving student achievement (Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). Participants in this study clearly identified wide variations in the application of the PLC model. While the two teachers in the fully operational system described successful structures, neither could explain *why* they were successful. The two teachers in the emerging systems portrayed PLCs as topic-specific and pertaining to improving instructional strategies. The remaining two explained PLCs as similar to other teacher meetings and often included discussion of operational or logistical items. This implied fracturing of the PLC process.

A large portion of participant commentary revealed the importance of anticipating needs of teachers when designing and planning PLCs. If this is considered during PLC development and measured in a continuous fashion throughout implementation, greater benefits for all may be realized. Additionally, no teachers shared knowledge of professional learning efforts as prescribed by federal law for the purpose of accountability compliance. Most participants erroneously

attributed PLC implementation to the latest trend in school improvement. Albeit directed at student success, Fullan et al. (2015) urged a shift from "external" accountability to one of "internal" accountability (p. 4). In this sense, schools are encouraged to consider "continuous improvement" as a "collective responsibility within the teaching profession" (Fullan et al., 2015, pp. 1-2). Unwittingly, participants in this study conveyed an understanding of communal accountability. If schools and districts are more concerted in communicating the true intents and purposes of PLCs, perhaps more teachers may contribute to the process of both individual and school improvement in a more constructive and advantageous manner.

Implications to Principals and School Leaders

The most significant finding of this study concerned teacher-led and leader-facilitated PLCs. In an almost protective nature, all participants repeatedly stated the most important premise of successful implementation was teachers' ability to assume ownership of the process. This followed statements of the need for principals to design a structure with clear expectations. This led to the development of the most pervasive theme, denoted as *Structured Norms*. Participants echoed similar findings in the work of Graham (2007) and Klingner (2004). Implied by prior research (DeMatthews, 2014; Bierly et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2017) and participants' commentary in this study, finding the appropriate balance between designing empowering structures and promoting productive collaboration remains an existing challenge. As Kociurauba (2017) found, and participants in this study alluded, absence of contribution and involvement led to disinterest and pessimism. This suggests expectations of principals are no better defined than those of teachers in school settings where PLCs are not efficacious and implies a need for further assessment of principals' roles as agents of success.

The work of Gilbert et al. (2018) highlighted the possibility of better preparing principals to lead PLCs through "immersive simulations" (p. 75). As such, school leaders could engage with avatars in virtual learning opportunities designed to mimic an actual PLC. Scenarios in the simulations could range from convivial and constructive to confrontational and defiant. Participants (n = 26) in Gilbert et al.'s (2018) study were enrolled in a university leadership certification program. Nearly 85% were already serving in school leadership roles and nearly all had experience leading PLCs (Gilbert et al., 2018). Results of the mixed methods study revealed a positive impact on confidence in leading PLCs, increased self-efficacy via enhanced skills, and a heightened awareness of duties and responsibilities because of prior participation in the immersive simulation. The results of this study reflect the desires of participants in the current study to have highly skilled principals proficient in developing and sustaining collaboration. This implies a need for redesign of leadership preparation of PLC implementation.

Implications to PLC Design

Participants in this study agreed with ideas proffered by Fullan (2014) who contended the role of the principal is not to focus on individual teacher development, as this will evolve through skillfully designed opportunities for collaboration. An interwoven theme of this study was *Motivating Factors*. Commentary related to this theme encompassed the need for structure, the importance of relationships, an emphasis on team, and a sense of belongingness. The most positive commentary from participants concerned teachers truly feeling successful in meeting the needs of students. No teacher spoke of their own needs. Responses about PLCs were almost automatic and consistent with the predominant research in the field which focuses primarily on student achievement. This implies the development of teacher efficacy is rarely considered in PLC design.

Traditionally, the all-encompassing goal of PLCs is school improvement (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Gray et al., 2017; Guskey, 2014; Hord, 2004; Hughes et al., 2006). However, participants in this study indicated a shallow understanding of the potential benefits in all aspects of teaching and learning, including teacher efficacy. This finding is consistent with the work of Antinluoma et al. (2018), Bullough (2007), and Downey (2016) who found it difficult to measure PLC effectiveness given a variety of assigned constructs.

Leadership and structure are highly relevant to the future design of PLCs. The findings of this study, along with the work of many others (Abadiano & Turner, 2004; Barton & Stepanek, 2012; Bullough, 2007; DeMatthews, 2014; DuFour, 2004; Gray et al., 2017; Hord, 1997, 2004; Owen, 2016) divulged the importance of PLC *design*. In hindsight, and because of participants' remarks, the researcher should have addressed *design* as *structure*. A realization of this researcher is that it is considered best practice in education to encourage *common* vocabulary to promote shared understanding of frequently implemented practices (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Thus, an implication of this study could be the discovered ambiguity of PLCs in general.

An anticipated issue was PLC time frames. However, I did not ask specific questions about when PLCs were implemented. Therefore, I was unable to determine if time frame is an indicator of successful implementation or an effect on teacher efficacy. Surprisingly, participants made no mention of time with regards to PLCs other than Mia who casually referenced PLC agendas for each week. Remarks pertaining to time were made in the context of relevance. This implies teachers are more worried about time being wasted than setting aside time for collaboration. In as such, future research is needed to examine whether scheduling and frequency are indicators of commitment to PLC collaboration.

Nearly absent from conversations with participants was discussion of opportunities for reflection. Instead, participants described *reviewing* efforts resulting from PLCs. This was done so in an evaluative manner in the mindset of accountability. Common practices expressed were progress monitoring and goal attainment. The word reflection was never spoken by participants. No one offered information about PLC practices that could be considered reflective. There was no mention of teachers taking time to pause for contemplation of efforts as a collaborative group. Teachers spoke explicitly of how combined efforts affected instructional practices and student success. Considering this and regardless of level of implementation maturity, further research focusing on reflective practices as an integral component of PLC structure is necessary.

Limitations of the Study

Openly discussing limitations of a study enables readers to gauge reliability of findings (Patton, 2003). It is a necessary component of establishing the researcher's work as credible (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2003). Limitations reduce the capacity to adequately discern implications and determine recommendations for future research. How these limitations are internalized is dependent upon perspective of the reader (Merriam, 2002). Limitations in this study were: subjectivity; the COVID-19 pandemic; seeking only perspectives of public school teachers; PLC time frame; lack of generalizability; amount of literature related specifically to the subject matter of the study.

Subjectivity

Although it became virtually non-problematic as the study progressed, the positive predisposition of the researcher towards PLCs required continual acts of reflexivity to prevent bias during data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). I have worked in five school systems and vividly recall the advent of the PLC model during the 2013-2014 school year. I currently serve in a

school level leadership position requiring me to design and implement professional learning for high school teachers. Previously, I have served in district level positions for which I was the sole coordinator of all professional learning, including implementation of PLCs. As a teacher, I placed high value on any opportunity for professional development. As a leader, I witnessed a wide range of emotions ranging from utter defiance to complete compliance. Although participants were unaware of my background, the very nature of my interview questions could have led them to act more positively than they would have otherwise. Acknowledgement combined with ownership of this through redundant analysis of data greatly diminished the capacity of subjectivity.

COVID-19 – A Global Pandemic

As I defended the proposed study in May 2020, the greatest limitation to this study was the COVID-19 pandemic. The original methodology was based upon in-person interviews and observations of participants' classrooms. This was made impossible due to state mandated closing of all schools, extended periods of quarantine, schools moving to virtual learning, and participants' personal experiences with COVID-19. These combined factors necessitated a waiting period for data collection of nearly 1 year.

Additionally, the study was planned to be conducted at the elementary level in one Middle Georgia school system where it had been approved by the district's department of curriculum and assessment. Shortly after, a change in personnel required securing permission to proceed with research once again. The approval process was much slower this time and delayed requests to participate until after the school year ended. After several contacts with school principals and repeated requests, only 2 teachers agreed to participate in the study. With much deliberation, I

expanded the search for participants beyond the district and was able to gain four more participants from three other districts. This cycle of the research process took nearly 6 months.

All participant interviews were completed remotely using Microsoft Teams. This required me to get to know participants' life history, have them recall lived experiences within PLC settings, and ask them to convey understanding of these experiences in a virtual setting. This can be perceived as a limitation to the study, as I may have missed subtle nuances more easily observable in a face-to-face interview. Time lapse between proposal defense and data collection may also be a limitation. Another limitation was the inability to observe teachers' classrooms. The intention of these observations was to see how teachers implemented professional learning initiatives. The goal was to examine the extent to which a higher level of fidelity coincided with greater maturity of PLCs. In conducting observations of PLCS and classrooms after interviews, it my hope to determine the balance between PLC participation and the impact on instructional practices in real world examples. Although satisfied with interviews, the study seemed incomplete without observations.

Finally, it is too soon to know the effects of COVID-19 protocols on educators. Even the predominant mode of virtual instruction is overly simplified as an exacerbator of learning loss. As teachers and schools struggle to return to some sense of normalcy, concerns of social and emotional well-being are becoming more predominant. Conversations have only recently begun as to how to address this. It is not possible to adequately measure the impact of COVID-19 on human interactions.

Nonrepresentation of Private School Teachers' Perspectives

General differences between public school settings and private school settings should be considered as a potential limitation. School structures play a significant role in PLC effectiveness (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2017). Where public schools must consider effects of national and state legislative acts pertaining to accountability, private schools generally have more latitude in designing teaching and learning for both students and adults. As recipients of federal funding, public schools are required to teach prescribed educational standards and students are subjected to state mandated exams measuring proficiency in English language arts, math, science, and social studies. Tuition based private schools have the freedom to develop courses, curriculum, and professional learning to meet the needs and desires of students and teachers in a more holistic manner. Additionally, class sizes are generally smaller in private schools thereby reducing the teacher to student ratio. Desires and needs of private schools are often determined and addressed by the group of individuals comprising the specific institution. Private schools habitually focus on developing sense of community within the system, as opposed to building communities withing the school to combat the competitive, and possibly divisive, nature of efforts to improve student achievement. Finally, certification is not always a requirement for teaching in private school settings. A lack of pedagogical knowledge could serve as an impediment to collaboration in the context of professional learning.

As the research indicates, the PLC is the predominant model for improving commitment to collaboration (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Gray et al., 2017; Marzano et al., 2005; Visio et al., 2008). Yet, the focus of this study was the perspectives of public school teachers. Due to the variances in school operations, it would be useful to understand how PLCs operate in private school settings. This knowledge could in inform future research efforts pertaining to factors inhibiting or promoting PLC effectiveness.

PLC Time Frame

Although noted earlier as a possible limiting factor, scheduling and frequency of PLCs was not discussed during interviews. I did not ask participants when they met for PLCs or how often. Instead, I asked what delivery method they preferred. Through my conversation with Mia, I did learn PLCs are held weekly in her school system. Schools in the system she teaches function at the highest level of implementation maturity. Had I asked this question of others, I might have learned how scheduling and timing compare with enabling structures in importance. Moreover, I might have learned if scheduling is an enabling structure in and of itself. Does this somehow align with consistency of expectations? Or is a rigidly designed schedule viewed as an expected encroachment upon teachers' time? For the purposes of this study, these questions remain unanswered.

Generalizability

While some may deem it appropriate to argue a lack of generalizability increases the usefulness of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013), it is considered responsible by researchers to note the findings of this study cannot be applied widely or in a variety of situations. It is merely the hope of the researcher that knowledge gained from this study can be extended to studies of similar design. The number of participants, sample population, narrowing the focus to teachers in Middle Georgia and South Georgia schools, and the virtual interview process compromises the ability to widely generalize results.

Sample Characteristics and Demographics

The sample population for this study included six participants, of which five were females and one was male. Only one participant was African American. Participants had earned multiple levels of certification and had varying years of experience in educational settings. Because of this, participant bias was possible. Additionally, misunderstanding, or preconceived notions of question topic may have led to underreported feelings, emotions, or perceptions. Purposeful sampling was used to determine the participant pool. Therefore, the only inferences that can be made apply to this specific group of respondents.

The impact of the limitation of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002) may have been decreased due to the researcher reserving the option to expand sample selection using "opportunistic or emergent sampling" (Patton, 2002, p. 240). As discussed in the COVID-19 section, this was out of necessity, as only two participants were obtained through the original methodology of principal recommendation. The other four were contacted directly based upon Middle Georgia RESA personnel recommendations and knowledgeable participants' suggestions of teachers in other districts as advised by Ravitch and Riggan (2017).

Conducting the study in only Middle and South Georgia school systems may be a further limitation in determining sample population. Traditions and cultures within these school settings often differ widely than those of other regions in the United States or internationally. Student population, demographics, and geographic setting of respective schools must also be considered as contributing factors. Two teachers taught in elementary schools in the same district, but one taught in an inner city school with a majority African American student population while the other taught in a school in an affluent section of the county with a predominantly Caucasian population. One taught in a rural county middle school with a more evenly distributed student body. One taught in a large county school with an expansive student population near the southern

border of the state. The remaining two teachers taught in a large, rural county in the southwest portion of the state; one taught kindergarten and the other taught high school. As experiences shape perceptions (Patton, 2002), the impact on their frame of reference must be acknowledged as a further limitation.

Novice Interviewer

As this was the first experience of the researcher in conducting qualitative interviews, transitions between portions of the interview could have been more productive. Admittedly, the researcher surmises some questions could have been asked in a different manner to promote robust responses. This could possibly inhibit data collection pertinent to thorough analysis. Additionally, the researcher was not persuasive enough to illicit expanded responses to the 10 statements adapted from a quantitative instrument measuring perception of efficacy. This was learned "in the moment" and should have been anticipated. Thankfully, most participants willingly offered additional commentary.

Limited Relevant Literature

Extensive research of the literature revealed the most common approaches in analyzing PLC effectiveness is examination of impact on student achievement and school culture (Bayar, 2014; Bullough, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Guskey, 2007; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Owen, 2016; Ping et al., 2018). Few studies were designed to elicit information pertaining to teachers' self-efficacy in any capacity (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) and even fewer were conducted in a qualitative manner. While an abundance of research in the field highlights the potential of PLCs to improve student achievement and enhance collaborative school cultures, little specifically addresses teachers acting as individual agents in these processes.

Recommendations

The current study was conducted in a phenomenological manner in an attempt to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences within PLC settings. Making meaning of their perceptions was a driving force in conveying understanding of these experiences. While not completely understanding self-efficacy as a defined concept, all provided insight as to how PLC implementation affects individual teacher development. Although not a completely novel approach, the results of this study add new information to previous bodies of work. Following a thorough review of the literature, a comprehensive analysis of data gathered from the study, and identifying limitations of the study, the researcher makes the following recommendations for future endeavors.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Enhance Characteristics of Sample Population

The sample size in this study was limited to six participants which relegates generalizability to only similar populations. Sample size could be increased by employing a mixed methods approach (i.e., survey followed by interviews). This would provide statistical application of findings which could be further examined through interview and observation data. Future research could also expand the geographical demographic of the population to the entire state, as opposed to the middle and southern regions of the state examined in this study. As a focal point of this study was the maturity level of PLC implementation, the researcher did not consider gender or ethnicity when developing the sample population. As such, future researchers could develop methods to analyze perspectives in the unique contexts of gender and/or race.

Use Seidman's Three Interview Approach

To gain more robust commentary, future researchers should follow Seidman's (2013) three-interview protocol. The researcher recommends conducting this process over a period of 1 school year to better assess maturity level of PLC implementation, as this was designated in this study by an outside entity and school principals. While the first interview, which entails simply getting to know participants could be conducted virtually, the remaining two interviews (experience details and reflection of meaning of experiences) should be conducted in person. A believed missed opportunity in this study was not fully facilitating expanded responses on Vibrant School Scale statements. If used by future researchers, a request for further explanation of yes or no answers should be pursued.

Conduct Observations after Interviews

A fervent desire of the researcher was to observe participating teachers in PLC settings to measure real-world application of professional learning. The original intent was to use an instrument known as the "PLC Observation Guide" contained in the "Professional Learning Community Manual" created by educators at Northwestern Middle School in Fulton County, Georgia. The manual is based upon the work of DuFour (2004). This is a comprehensive guide to implementation of PLCs at the highest level of fidelity. The observation guide is not a classroom observation guide. It is designed to measure efficient operations of PLCs and requires observers to consider aspects such as room setting, establishment of norms, roles, responsibilities, structure, and accountability. A strong recommendation is to extend the interview process by conducting observations of PLCs using such a guide followed by classroom observations. The researcher suggests an ideal study would begin with a survey of multiple participants and narrowed down to a include interviews of participants from a diverse sample, followed by PLC and classroom observations.

Evaluate PLC Effect on Teacher Efficacy

In thoughtfully considering further implications of this study, an overarching issue in need of investigation is how PLC effectiveness affects teachers' perceptions of efficacy. Is it possible variability in PLC effectiveness causes variability in teachers' perception of self-efficacy? Instead of analyzing PLCs in the contexts of student achievement and teacher efficacy, future researchers should evaluate schoolwide expectations and PLC protocols to determine effectiveness of the process. Though scant research exists on maturity level, using such could aid in identifying PLC protocols promoting effectiveness in the sense of common characteristics of collective growth.

Summary

The emphasis of this basic interpretive qualitative study was the perspectives of six teachers participating in PLCs in Middle and South Georgia. The conceptual framework for the study was Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy evolves within the individual through experiences of success (Bandura, 1997). Individuals with higher levels of efficacy expectations are more tenacious in efforts to achieve (Bandura, 1997). More specifically, Bandura linked willingness to excel to "confidence" (p. 382) in ability gained through scenarios in which skills development is encouraged through motivation, encouragement, and adequate guidance towards expected outcomes (Bandura, 2008). Interest for this project arose from my curiosity as to why some teachers seem intrinsically motivated to excel, while others crave stringent and repetitive direction to meet minimal expectations, and some are motivated only by extrinsic factors, such as possible accountability repercussions.

I explained how accountability legislation led to the necessity of PLCs in schools and districts across the nation in Chapter I. The justification for evaluating PLCs in the context of self-efficacy was revealed by emphasizing the need for narrative inquiries of teachers' perceptions

through qualitative analysis. The conceptual framework for the study was also presented and provided a rationale for my selection of the topic. In Chapter II relevant literature was reviewed and began with an overview of recent legislation pertaining to professional learning requirements and a historical perspective of professional learning. A brief history of PLCs was provided. Characteristics of PLCs were defined and a discussion of the benefits of participation followed. Recent literature about factors affecting implementation of PLCs precluded explanation of self-efficacy theory as expressed in existing literature to date. While the focus of the review was teacher efficacy development within PLC settings, the chapter concluded with pertinent information about the role of the principal as instructional leader. This was considered essential to the discussion, as it continually appeared throughout the literature.

In Chapter III, I described the methodology for collecting and examining data. Setting, population, and sample demographics were provided to enable readers to gain a sense of place when contemplating findings. An explanation for choosing PLC effectiveness in fostering teacher efficacy was offered for consideration. Validity constructs of qualitative research were described, and ethical issues were reflected upon in an anticipatory manner.

I presented narrative profiles of participants in Chapter IV. Ample commentary was included to enable readers to develop a vivid mindset of how individual experiences shape perceptions. In Chapter V, I explained results in the framework of emerging themes. Relevant participant commentary accompanied the discussion. In Chapter VI, I aligned findings with research questions of the study, discussed implications of the study, provided limitations, and made recommendations for future research.

Surprising to me, was the level of intensity with which participants discussed the importance of teacher-led PLCs. Even among those displaying trust and respect in their principal

(all but one), there was a pervasive theme of a hands-off approach to instructional leadership. As an administrator with nearly 8 years of experience evaluating teachers using the state mandated accountability model, I am aware of the rancor that often accompanies instructional leadership. However, participants in this study suggested a highly feasible manipulation of common practices in many Georgia school districts. Collective commentary indicated a need to return to or revisit team-building and distributed leadership through the development of effective, enabling, and empowering PLC structures. Unexpectedly, no participant expressed a desire to end the practice of PLCs. All communicated the importance of teachers collaborating yet retaining control of the ongoing process.

Interestingly, no participant conveyed a working knowledge of efficacy. And all teachers, except Dan, displayed hesitancy and discomfort in attempting to define it. In totality, participants' responses offered credence to the PLC as a vehicle for student achievement and school improvement, and as not suitable in fostering individual teacher development, much less efficacy. However, participants in this study provided rich reflections of PLC participation that can be easily understood and converted into plans of action for PLC design. Their responses indicated an affection for collaboration with fellow teachers, but resistance to do so in the absence of structure.

Contemplating the findings of this study, I concluded development of self-efficacy is largely ignored in existing PLC structures. Further, there are disparaging views of instructional leadership. If the true responsibility of principals in developing teacher leaders is to create collaborative opportunities promoting growth as Fullan (2014) proposed, teacher efficacy must be incorporated in leadership development. Additionally, certification and accountability mandates in Georgia require school districts to develop and sustain professional learning. Participants'

commentary in this study indicated the PLC model is conducive to enabling districts to meet these requirements in an operative and impactful manner.

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APPENDIX A:

Interview Questions

Appendix A
Interview Questions

The first portion of the interview will consist of open-ended questions. You will be given opportunities to elaborate.

1. Where were you born and raised?

2. Tell me about your family . . . your parents . . . your siblings.

3. Where did you go to school/college?

4. Why did you want to become a teacher?

5. Did someone inspire you to become a teacher? If so, please tell me about this person.

6. How many years teaching experience do you have?

7. What is your area(s) of certification?

8. What subjects have you taught?

9. What is your current position?

10. Describe a time when a colleague deeply influenced your instruction.

11. What is your understanding of professional learning and/or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)?

12. What method of delivery should be used? Who is responsible?

13. What is the role of leadership in PLCs?

14. How do you know if PLCs are effective for all?

15. Can you describe the kind of opportunities provided to you via PLCs?

16. How do you think PLCs impact school culture?

17. How would you define efficacy?

18. How would you define teacher efficacy?

19. How would you define collective efficacy?

20. As a follow up to those who expressed some awareness of efficacy: Do PLCs contribute to efficacy? If so, how?

Now, I am going to ask you to react to series of statements.

21. I have opportunities here to pursue independent learning.

22. In our school, my voice matters.

23. I feel that I belong here.

24. I know there is someone in this school I can turn to for help.

25. I feel comfortable sharing my opinions with people in this school.

26. In this school, we openly explore controversial issues.

27. We have a lot of fun together here.

28. I feel an abiding sense of trust in this school.

29. I have a voice in decisions that affect me.

30. In our school, we feel empowered to take responsibility for our own learning.

APPENDIX B:

Vibrant School Scale

Appendix B
Vibrant School Scale

The Vibrant School Scale

1. Curiosity is nurtured in our school.
2. There are opportunities here for students to pursue topics they are curious about.
3. I have opportunities here to pursue independent learning.
4. In our school, my voice matters.
5. I feel that I belong here.
6. I know there is someone in this school I can turn to for help.
7. Students here are taught to question why things are the way they are.
8. I feel comfortable sharing my opinions with people in this school.
9. In our school, learning is fun.
10. In this school, we openly explore controversial issues.
11. We value and learn from our mistakes.
12. We value movement and physical activity as essential to engaged learning. 13.Students are supported to pursue their individual interests in school.
14. We have a lot of fun together here.
15. Students here are taught to critique the status quo.
16. In this school, creativity abounds.
17. We engage in learning with a playful spirit.
18. We take delight in experiencing other cultures.
19. I feel an abiding sense of trust in this school.
20. I have a voice in decisions that affect me.
21. In our school, we feel empowered to take responsibility for our own learning.

APPENDIX C:

Pilot Interview Questions

Appendix C
Pilot Interview Questions

1. Where were you born and raised?

2. Tell me about your family . . . your parents . . . your siblings.

3. Where did you go to school/college?

4. Why did you want to become a teacher?

5. Did someone inspire you to become a teacher? If so, please tell me about this person.

6. How many years teaching experience do you have?

7. What is your area(s) of certification?

8. What subjects have you taught?

9. What is your current position?

10. Describe a time when a colleague deeply influenced your instruction.

11. What is your understanding of professional learning and/or Professional Learning

    Communities (PLCs)?

12. What method of delivery should be used? Who is responsible?

13. What is the role of leadership in PLCs?

14. How do you know if PLCs are effective for all?

15. Can you describe the kind of opportunities provided to you via PLCs?

16. How do you think PLCs impact school culture?

17. How would you define efficacy?

18. How would you define teacher efficacy?

19. How would you define collective efficacy?

20. As a follow up to those who expressed some awareness of efficacy: Do PLCs contribute to

    efficacy? If so, how?

APPENDIX D:

Permission Email

Appendix D
Permission Email

Melanie H McLemore <mhmclemore@valdosta.edu>
To: dclement@email.wm.edu
Cc: melaniemclemore@att.net
Monday, Mar 30 at 10:53 AM

Good Afternoon,

I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University in Georgia. I am also a veteran educator. I am proposing a qualitative study examining lived experiences of teachers in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and how they perceive these as facilitating or inhibiting to the development of self-efficacy. I would like permission to use some of the items from your Vibrant School Scale. Although my study will be small in nature, I believe teachers' elaborations to open-ended questions containing phrases such as "I feel comfortable sharing my opinions with people in this school" would provide much needed insight to the effectiveness of PLCs. May I have your permission to use?

You can also reach me at melaniemclemore@att.net.

Davis Clement <dclement@email.wm.edu>
To: Melanie H McLemore
Cc: melaniemclemore@att.net
Wed, Apr 1 at 5:46 PM

Hi, Melanie.

You have my permission to use the scale or parts of the scale. I would love to see a brief summary of your results.

All the best,

D

Davis Clement, Ph.D.
Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership
307 Fairway Ave.
Charlottesville, VA 22902

APPENDIX E:

Citi Certification

Appendix E
Citi Certification

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COMPLETION REPORT - PART 1 OF 2 COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS*

* NOTE: Scores on this <u>Requirements Report</u> reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- **Name:** Melanie McLemore (ID: 6730837)
- **Institution Affiliation:** Valdosta State University (ID: 475)
- **Institution Email:** mhmclemore@valdosta.edu
- **Institution Unit:** Educational Leadership
- **Phone:** 770-312-9634

- **Curriculum Group:** Human Research
- **Course Learner Group:** IRB Basic
- **Stage:** Stage 1 - Basic Course
- **Description:** This course is suitable for Investigators and staff conducting SOCIAL / HUMANISTIC / BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH with human subjects. The VA module must be completed if you plan to work with subjects at a VA facility.

- **Record ID:** 25021748
- **Completion Date:** 20-Oct-2017
- **Expiration Date:** 19-Oct-2020
- **Minimum Passing:** 80
- **Reported Score*:** 89

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID: 490)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE (ID: 491)	20-Oct-2017	4/5 (80%)
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	20-Oct-2017	4/5 (80%)
Basic Institutional Review Board (IRB) Regulations and Review Process (ID: 2)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	20-Oct-2017	3/5 (60%)
Valdosta State University (ID: 746)	20-Oct-2017	No Quiz

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?ke4f73b7f-193f-443b-9abb-9d5435be173b-25021748

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)
Email: support@citiprogram.org Phone: 888-529-5929
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)
COMPLETION REPORT - PART 2 OF 2 COURSEWORK TRANSCRIPT**

** NOTE: Scores on this Transcript Report reflect the most current quiz completions, including quizzes on optional (supplemental) elements of the course. See list below for details. See separate Requirements Report for the reported scores at the time all requirements for the course were met.

- **Name:** Melanie McLemore (ID: 6730837)
- **Institution Affiliation:** Valdosta State University (ID: 475)
- **Institution Email:** mhmclemore@valdosta.edu
- **Institution Unit:** Educational Leadership
- **Phone:** 770-312-9634

- **Curriculum Group:** Human Research
- **Course Learner Group:** IRB Basic
- **Stage:** Stage 1 - Basic Course
- **Description:** This course is suitable for Investigators and staff conducting SOCIAL / HUMANISTIC / BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH with human subjects. The VA module must be completed if you plan to work with subjects at a VA facility.

- **Record ID:** 25021748
- **Report Date:** 20-Jun-2022
- **Current Score**:** 94

REQUIRED, ELECTIVE, AND SUPPLEMENTAL MODULES	MOST RECENT	SCORE
Basic Institutional Review Board (IRB) Regulations and Review Process (ID: 2)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Defining Research with Human Subjects - SBE (ID: 491)	20-Oct-2017	4/5 (80%)
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	20-Oct-2017	4/5 (80%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	07-Jul-2020	5/5 (100%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBE (ID: 490)	20-Oct-2017	5/5 (100%)
Valdosta State University (ID: 746)	20-Oct-2017	No Quiz

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?ke4f73b7f-193f-443b-9abb-9d5435be173b-25021748

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)
Email:
support@citiprogra
m.org Phone: 888-
529-5929
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org

APPENDIX F:

Institutional Review Board Exemption

Appendix F
Institutional Review Board Exemption
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research
Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04051-2020   **Responsible Researcher:** Melanie McLemore

Supervising Faculty: Dr. William Truby

Project Title: *Qualitative Study of Improving Instructional Practices and Self-efficacy through Experiences in Professional*
Learning Communities as Perceived by Identified Elementary School Teachers in Middle Georgia.

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.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all data (email correspondence, survey data, participant name lists, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Research consent statement must be read aloud, and a copy provided to each participant at the start of the interview.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of participants provided the recording is used for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript and then must be deleted.*

⊠ *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.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie   07.08.2020   **Thank *you* for submitting an IRB application.**
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator   *Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*

APPENDIX G:

District Approval Letter

Appendix G
District Approval Letter

June 11, 2020

Melanie McLemore
Valdosta State University
Valdosta, GA

Dear Melanie,

hank you for your request to conduct research in the Bibb County School District. Your request has been approved. I am asking that you continue coordinating through this office and with our Professional Learning Department as determine the schools to conduct your research. Once you have completed your research, we ask you share your findings with my department so we can add to our body of knowledge.

Good luck, especially given the COVID-19 Virus will offer opportunities with your efforts!

Sincerely,

Anthony Jones
Director, Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability
Bibb County School District

cc: Bertha Caldwell, Director Professional Learning

APPENDIX H:

Email to Principals

Appendix H
Email to Principals

Original Email:

Good Afternoon,

Thank you so much for taking my call today. I would very much like to interview at least two of your teachers for my doctoral study entitled "**A Qualitative Study of Improving Instructional Practices and Self-efficacy through Experiences in Professional Learning Communities as Perceived by Identified Elementary School Teachers in Middle Georgia.**" I have been approved to conduct my study in Bibb by Mr. Kevin Adams, Director of Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Accountability. I was approved previously by Mr. Tony Jones and attached a copy of that letter to this email. I have also been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Valdosta State University.

I will conduct interviews using an online format, so the intrusion into participants' time will be limited and there will be no need to meet me in person. I really want to conduct interviews as soon as possible. If participants prefer to contact me via phone, my cell number is 770-312-9634. I will be happy to provide further details if desired.

Again, thank you for allowing me access to your teachers. I look forward to sharing my results with you.

Kindest regards,
Melanie McLemore
Graduate Student

Principal's Forwarded Message to Potential Candidates:

The doctoral candidate named in this email may contact regarding an interview for her doctoral study. This is to notify you that permission to participate has been approved by the district. You are under no obligation to do so, however, the invitation is extended. Additionally, you may find the study of particular interest to you since we heavily engage in professional development to enhance teacher practices and student learning.

APPENDIX I:

Interview Participant Invitation

Appendix I

Interview Participant Invitation

Dear Faculty Member,

You are invited to take part in a study regarding your participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Interview sessions will be used to collect data from participants.

The interview sessions will provide the researcher an opportunity to learn about your experiences in PLCs. More information will be sent to those interested in taking part in the study before the first interview session.

Your views will be used to help the researcher explore the effects of PLCs on teachers' instructional practices and self-efficacy.

Participation criteria: must have been involved in the implementation of PLCs at this institution.

If you would like to take part in this study, please contact:

Melanie McLemore at mhmclemore@valdosta.edu or call/text (770) 312-9634.

Thank you for your interest,

Melanie H. McLemore

Doctoral Candidate, May 2020

APPENDIX J:

Informed Consent

Appendix J

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "A Qualitative Study of Improving Instructional Practices and Self-efficacy through Experiences in Professional Learning Communities as Perceived by Identified Elementary School Teachers in Middle Georgia," which is being conducted by Melanie H. McLemore, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of teachers in PLCs and their perceptions of PLCs' effectiveness in improving instructional practices and promoting teachers' self-efficacy. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us gain valuable insight about the best strategies and practices that have had the most significant impact on student achievement, which may benefit administrators at the building and district level, local and state boards of education, regional education service agencies, and university, college, and certification agencies as they enact laws, regulations, and policies and hire, develop and train new and veteran teachers. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 1-2 hours. Due to the impacts of COVID-19 and social distancing, the interview may take place either by phone or video conference. The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the files 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 mhmclemore@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.