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## A Little Help from our Friends: The Benefits and Challenges of Mandatory Teacher Collaboration

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A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS: THE BENEFITS AND  
CHALLENGES OF MANDATORY TEACHER COLLABORATION

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## DEDICATION

My dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Kay and David, who taught me the importance of education and hard work and who have always provided invaluable guidance during my academic pursuits. It is dedicated to my siblings, Emily and William, and to my wife and stepdaughter, Lisa and Ceci, for all of their encouragement and support. My dissertation is also dedicated to my grandparents, Lou and Herb, whose home was filled with books and ideas, and whose love of learning has been passed down through the generations.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore secondary English teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of professional learning communities (PLCs), with particular focus on what they considered to be characteristics of effective PLCs. Through a qualitative study in grounded theory using individual interviews among a subgroup of ten secondary English teachers, various factors distinguishing successful professional learning communities emerged. Examining what these teachers have learned from personal experience created a better understanding of what high schools can do to improve the effectiveness of teacher collaboration and, consequently, the academic success of high school students. The study determined that there are common factors that help make professional learning communities more successful.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	14
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....	33
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.....	41
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION .....	75
REFERENCES .....	105
APPENDIX A – INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	113

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a push by educational reformers to “transform schools into places where teachers work collectively on instruction” (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015, p. 475). This is a result of two coinciding factors: the increased level of teacher and school accountability in the public school system and the positive correlation between teacher collaboration and student achievement. Addressing the former, legislative efforts in the United States, via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and more recently the Race to the Top program, have created an “age of accountability, where teachers’ work is shaped by ever-increasing pressure to improve student performance on standardized tests” (Datnow, 2011, p. 148). The NCLB of 2001 is the federal US law mandating high-stakes testing in mathematics and language arts that threatens the loss of funding for failing schools or districts (US Department of Education, 2002). Teachers must now follow federal, state, and district procedures and accountability measures that exist on a much larger level than in the past (Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

With technology advancing and data being more widely available, the national tests provide “a means of measuring teacher performance through pupil performance;” consequently, teacher professional development and curriculum development are being “shaped in response to aspects of learning which [can] be measured” (Bodman, Taylor, & Morris, 2012, p. 16). New initiatives and strategies are being implemented on the local,



state, and national level in order to improve student performance on standardized tests. High-stakes testing in the US standardizes the content of the curriculum as well as teachers' pedagogies as teachers work to deliver test-driven curriculum (Au, 2011).

In order to standardize the curriculum and teachers' pedagogies, many school districts are implementing mandatory teacher collaboration. "Collaboration within a school can occur between teachers within a grade level, in a content area, or across support services and can help build trusting and collegial relationships;" this can result in "more efficient use of planning time, pooled resources, and sharing of effective practices, which can increase productivity and satisfaction" (Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer, & Lichon, 2015, p. 51). Research has shown that there are greater student achievement gains in schools where teacher collaboration is taking place (Ronfeldt et al, 2015). A study done by Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) found that elementary schools with higher levels of collaboration also had higher levels of student achievement, even after controlling for a set of student-level variables (i.e., gender, race, socioeconomic status [SES], and prior achievement) and school-level variables (i.e., school size, school-wide SES, and proportion minority students). As a result of research finding a positive correlation between teacher collaboration and student achievement, more teachers are being told by administrators that they have to work together in order to improve student academic success.

One of the main ways that teacher collaboration is being enforced is through professional learning communities (PLCs). "Teachers are typically organized into specific teams within a professional learning community, whether these teams are based on grade level, subject area, or an area of professional interest, and these teams are given

time during the school day to meet and converse” (Graham, 2007, p. 4). When implementing the PLC model, some schools have these teams “analyze data generated from common student assessments and use them to develop instructional practices and specific intervention strategies” (Hallman, Smith, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015, p. 195). Although teachers working together to improve their instruction is not a new development, teaching in the United State historically has been more isolated work (Lortie, 1975). Teachers could choose to approach coworkers to get advice, support, or guidance; but this collaboration was not mandatory, and if a teacher wanted, he or she could decide to work independently. Now that teachers in many school are being told they have to collaborate, risks and challenges do present themselves. Although there is abundant evidence that communication among teachers and between teachers and students helps improve student achievement, using data to guide instruction is time intensive and can add to teachers’ already large workloads (Datnow, 2011).

Along with an increased workload, involuntary collaboration poses a potential threat to teacher autonomy and teacher professionalism. As schools attempt to have large groups of people working toward a common goal, they run the risk of overemphasizing formalization, centralization, and standardization, creating a highly rigid structure that takes away the professionalism of teachers (Tschannen, 2009). When school leaders implement policies and regulations that result in the over-standardization of work processes, this can result in reductions in worker satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and creativity (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2002).

If worker satisfaction decreases among teacher, teacher turnover is more likely, because “job dissatisfaction leads to stress and ultimately to burnout if allowed to

continue unabated” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 39). One of the main concerns of the teaching profession is that of keeping the most capable, intelligent, and creative teachers in the field (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Historically, teachers have remained in the classroom for thirty years before retirement; however, “a teaching career in the United States is now down to eleven years” (Haberman, 2005, p. 336). Many of today’s new teachers “don’t stay in the profession long enough to become veterans;” this disconcerting trend is costing the “school systems billions of dollars [and] also is negatively affecting student achievement” (Coggins, 2013, p. 42). Increased teacher turnover creates a shortage of teachers, and schools are filling these positions with less effective teachers (Nawaz, 2015). Although teacher collaboration has its challenges, there are ways to make professional learning communities more effective. As Hargreaves (1994) stated, “Collaboration and restructuring can be helpful or harmful, and their meanings and realizations therefore need to be inspected repeatedly to ensure that their educational and social benefits are positive” (p. 248).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many students across the country are not having their academic needs met, and some of these students will not complete high school. “Students who fail to graduate from high school face a very bleak future. Because the basic skills conveyed in high school and higher education are essential for success in today’s economy, students who do not receive these skills are likely to suffer with significantly reduced earnings and employment prospects” (Greene, 2001, p. 4). South Carolina has among the lowest high school graduation rates in the country. Studies have shown that collaboration improves

student academic performance, so many administrators are requiring teachers to work together to address the needs of struggling students.

The problem with making collaboration mandatory, often through the use of PLCs, is that some teachers feel that their autonomy is being threatened and, consequently, they do not feel like they are being treated like professionals. The standardization of teaching in the United States “due to high-stakes testing is connected to issues of control over classroom practices, with teachers’ power being increasingly usurped through both policy and curricular structure” (Au, 2011, p. 338). Teachers are looking for “guidance and support, but they do not want to be told exactly what to do” (Carl, 2014, p. 42). Inversely, in situations when general teacher autonomy increased, so did professionalism and empowerment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Additional challenges resulting from collaboration include contention between teachers who have opposing education ideologies or instructional practices and teachers not being able to meet the needs of their students by a one-size-fits-all approach. “One of the inevitable byproducts of conversation, especially purposeful conversation, is contention. When educators are asked to make collaborative decisions, there are bound to be differences of opinion” (Graham, 2007, p. 4). One thing that can create conflicting opinions between teachers is disagreement on how to approach different classes; each class has students who do not all learn the same way and teachers who cannot teach them all the same way. Teachers need to adjust their instructional style to reflect the needs of their students (Levy, 2008). If teachers feel like they do not have the freedom to adjust their curriculum and instruction in order to better engage their students, this can bring out

feelings such as anger, anxiety, and burnout, which are large factors that can result in teachers dropping out of the profession (Hughes, 2001).

Teachers who lose their passion for teaching can lose their ability to connect to students. “The more enthusiastic and dynamic teachers are, the more engaging students become behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally” (Zhang, 2013, p. 52). In addition, “lack of motivation is a major cause of teachers’ turnover” (Nawaz, 2015, p. 55). Many of the teachers who do not leave the profession might continue teaching, but they end up just trying to survive instead of working to improve their teaching and excel in their field (Phelps & Benson, 2012). Teacher autonomy specifically is “a critical component in the motivation of teachers to stay or leave the teaching profession” (Pearson & Moowaw, 2005, p. 41). Greater autonomy along with administrative support has been found to correlate with lower levels of teacher migration (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006).

### **Nature of the Study**

This was a qualitative study using individual interviews with ten English teachers within a large high school in South Carolina. The outcome is intended to discover those significant factors that contribute to successful PLCs, along with investigating the benefits and challenges of mandatory teacher collaboration. This method will be best because of the homogenous subgroup to be studied and will allow for individual teacher participants to give candid, personal feedback on their teaching experience.

### **Major Research Questions**

What are the benefits of teacher collaboration?

What are the risks and challenges of mandated teacher collaboration?

What are the characteristics of effective professional learning communities?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine professional learning communities at a larger high school in South Carolina. Through interviews with members of the English department (taking into consideration factors such as gender, race, and teaching experience), this study examines the characteristics of effective professional learning communities from teachers' perspectives. Benefits, challenges, and risks of teacher collaboration are also investigated. The findings of this study will hopefully provide a framework for high schools to establish more effective teacher collaboration in order to improve student academic achievement and increase teacher job satisfaction while decreasing teacher turnover.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of my study is to look at how professional learning communities create tension between the desires of the organization and the desires of the individual. This tension falls under the conceptual framework of structure versus agency: structure, being demonstrated by the professional learning communities (along with larger organizational goals), and agency, being connected to the needs of the teacher and his/her desire for autonomy.

Antony Giddens, a sociologist who was born in London in 1938 and later earned a Masters degree in Sociology at the London School of Economics, studied structure and agency (Loyal, 2003). According to Giddens, "an agent is an intentional, purposive and, on the whole rational being who behaves according to what he/she knows or believes will be the outcome of his/her action" (Loyal, 2003, p. 56). To be an agent means to have some degree of control over one's social relations, which in turn implies the ability to

transform those social relations (Sewell, 1992). An agent loses power if his or her actions are no longer able to make a difference on a course of events (Giddens, 1984).

Structure is defined by orthodox functionalists “either in terms of the law-like regularities that govern the behavior of social facts, or as the aggregated patterning of social behavior over time” (Loyal, 2003, p. 71). To put more simply, structure can take the form of either organizational rules and laws or social norms and customs. Structures have at least two defining characteristics: they make order out of some set of things, and this order has a degree of permanence (Lemert, 1997). Out of structure, social systems are created. Giddens describes social systems as “empirically observable, intertwining, and relatively bounded social practices that link persons across time and space” (Sewell, 1992, p. 5).

Throughout history different ideologies have reflected the conflict between structure and agency. The Enlightenment in the 1800s was a period that focused on reason and critical thinking; during this time, liberalism arose, emphasizing individual freedom and challenging the fixed, religious, hierarchal order that interfered with agency (Loyal, 2003). On the other side of the ideological spectrum there was socialism, which was derived from the works of Karl Marx. Socialism is a “centrally planned economy in which the government controls all productions” (Heilbroner, 2008, p. 1). Socialism focuses on establishing a firm social structure, where the focus is on the whole rather than the individual.

Liberalism and socialism have long been “antagonistic intellectual, moral, and political traditions - expressed largely, though not solely, in the incompatibility of their points of departure concerning the individual and the social” (Loyal, 2003, p. 25). The

same ideological rift can be seen in today's education system, between teachers who prefer to work independently and schools that are requiring mandatory teacher collaboration. When schools are promoting mandatory teacher collaboration, this reflects the social structure taking prominence in order to benefit the whole, but the mandated teacher collaboration threatens individualism that emphasizes the importance of autonomy and personal decision making.

In their research, Porter and Lawler (1968) discussed the importance of autonomy in the workplace. They proposed a model of intrinsic and extrinsic work motivation: intrinsic motivation involves people doing an activity because they find it interesting and get satisfaction from the activity itself; extrinsic motivation, in contrast, requires a connection between the activity and some separate, extrinsic consequence, such as tangible or verbal rewards. Porter and Lawler advocated structuring the work environment so that effective performance would lead to both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, which would in turn produce total job satisfaction. Total job satisfaction was to be accomplished by making jobs more interesting (thus more intrinsically rewarding), and by making extrinsic rewards such as higher pay and promotions clearly dependent upon effective performance.

As a teacher, a person's extrinsic rewards are limited. The types of promotions and bonuses that people can obtain in other careers are not usually found in the education field. There might be opportunities for teachers to supplement their incomes through additional degrees or certifications, but generally a teacher's pay is modest and salary increases happen gradually over time without any major jumps in pay. A high school teacher's pay is also not equated with that teacher's job performance. Because of limited



opportunities for extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation becomes all the more important when trying to prevent teacher turnover.

Cognitive evaluation theory and self-determination theory both look at the importance of personal autonomy in the work place. Cognitive evaluation theory suggests that “feelings of competence as well as feelings of autonomy are important for intrinsic motivation” (Gagne, 2005, p 332). Self-determination theory looks at the distinction between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation: “Autonomy involves acting with a sense of volition and having the experience of choice. When people engage an activity because they find it interesting, they are doing the activity wholly volitionally (e.g., I work because it is fun). In contrast, being controlled involves acting with a sense of pressure, a sense of having to engage in the actions” (Gagne, 2005, p. 334).

In their research, Koestner and Losier (2002) found that autonomous motivation is beneficial in situations involving both complex tasks that are interesting and less complex tasks that require discipline. Teaching is this type of job: a mix of both complex and less complex tasks. Research on the effects of an autonomy-supportive managerial style has demonstrated a variety of positive work outcomes (e.g., Deci et al., 1989, 2001). Further, the field experiment by Deci et al. (1989) showed that training managers who increase employees’ opportunities to take initiative and acknowledge their perspectives improved employees’ attitudes and trust in the organization where they worked.

Many studies indicate that autonomous motivation “maximizes heuristic performance, citizenship, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and wellbeing” (Gagne, 2005, p. 354). Research suggests that autonomous work motivation is created in environments

where jobs are interesting, challenging, and allow choice (Gagne, 2005). These findings would suggest that if teachers have less control over their teaching and instructional practices, they would lose autonomy and, consequently, work motivation.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as:

1. *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*: The federal US law mandating high-stakes testing in mathematics and language arts that threatens the loss of funding for failing schools or districts (US Department of Education, 2002)
2. *Structure*: The law-like regularities that govern the behavior of social facts, or the aggregated patterning of social behavior over time (Loyal, 2003, p. 71)
3. *Agency*: An intentional, purposive and, on the whole, rational being who behaves according to what he/she knows or believes will be the outcome of his/her action (Loyal, 2003, p. 56)
4. *Professional Learning communities*: Groups of individuals committed to continuous improvement through shared values and reflection (Rasberry, Mahajan, & Center for Teaching, 2008, p. 2)
5. *Collectivism*: The prioritization of group interests over self-interest, as opposed to individualism which refers to the prioritization of self-interest over group interest (Hofstede, 2001)
6. *Power Distance*: The extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98)
7. *Scripted Curriculum*: A pre-developed tool that directs teachers on what to say during instruction and when to say it (Milner, 2013, p. 13)

## **Limitations**

This study is limited by the following issues: the study is restricted to one large South Carolina high school and teachers from just one subject area; with fewer demographic variables being examined, it will be more difficult to identify all the factors that might influence effective professional learning communities. Another possible limitation of this study includes my own subjectivity. As an English teacher who has worked in a school where mandatory collaboration has been implemented, I have developed a degree of bias against mandatory collaboration and professional learning communities; although, as I have researched the topic, I have become more understanding of what administrators are attempting to accomplish through mandated collaboration. Nonetheless, my bias still exists, and I need to be aware of this bias as I conduct my study and try to stay as objective as possible.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study is important in trying to better understand the challenges and benefits of PLCs in an attempt to make teacher collaboration more effective. A successful balance must be found between encouraging teacher collaboration while providing teacher autonomy. If teacher collaboration is not taking place, this could be detrimental to the learning of students; but if teacher collaboration is strictly mandated, some teachers will feel their autonomy threatened and their professionalism questioned, and this could result in teacher burnout and subsequent turnover.

Most of the existing literature I found either focused on the advantages of collaboration or discussed the importance of teacher autonomy. My study is filling existing gaps in the literature by talking to teachers about the potential conflict create by

the interplay of these two ideas. Some of the existing literature I found did this, but my study expands on this idea by looking specifically at people teaching a specific grade level (high school) and a specific subject (English). Much of the research I found looked at elementary or middle school teachers and was not subject-specific.

### **Summary of Key Points**

This study will examine, analyze, and identify some of the significant factors affecting the implementation of professional learning communities. Through individual interviews with ten high school English teachers, themes will emerge as teachers within this subgroup candidly discuss what they believe to be true and needed as far as making teacher collaboration more effective. Accountability has pushed states and the nation to raise the bar on education; therefore, schools and districts are looking for ways to improve. The real scope is not just to improve teacher collaboration, but it is for finding answers and further providing optimal educational experiences for all students while maintain the autonomy, professionalism, and morale of teachers.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, a review of the literature used to support this study is exhibited. The review of literature will investigate the growing focus educators are placing on professional learning communities and the positive outcomes that have been found to relate to teacher collaboration. Research identifies characteristics of effective PLCs, including school demographics, organizational factors, and a foundation of trust between teachers and administrators. Challenges that teachers face when participating in PLCs are also looked at, including teacher contention, an inability to meet the needs of different classes, and threats to teacher professionalism and autonomy.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Professional Learning Communities**

Professional learning communities can be defined as “groups of individuals committed to continuous improvement through shared values and reflection” (Rasberry et. al, 2008, p. 2). In a PLC, grade-level meetings or department meetings are “focused around a specific purpose, such as creating a common assessment, discussing and comparing student work samples in order to ensure consistent grading practices, or using assessment data to identify effective teaching practices” (Graham, 2007, p. 3). Together, teachers working in professional learning communities try to better meet the needs of their students by engaging in deeper learning through collaboration (Rasberry et al, 2008).

One of the most important features of PLC team meetings is the focus on active learning. PLC activities include a large amount of group dialogue that is “typically driven by active learning components: developing lesson plans, reviewing student work, scoring assessments, and others.” At the center “of the PLC model is the idea of teams of teachers sitting down together and engaging in substantive conversations about issues related to teaching and learning. Through these conversations, teachers share instructional strategies, make decisions about curriculum and assessment practices, and analyze student achievement data.” As a result of these conversations, teachers are

expected to learn from one another and make improvements in what they teach and how they teach it (Graham, 2007, p. 11).

When teachers become part of professional learning communities, they begin to approach teaching from a different perspective, utilizing new strategies. “In PLCs, teams are open to critical thinking, reflective dialogue, self-examination, and resolving issues that impede student success. “Each member must be committed to the time, energy, and collaboration required to bring about lasting change in their classrooms and school” (Rasberry et al., 2008, p. 2). Teachers unfamiliar with this amount of self-reflection and critical thinking might find the process daunting at first, but over time the benefits of teacher collaborations become apparent.

### **Benefits of PLCs**

There is a large amount of research that has “established the positive impact of PLCs on both teacher and student outcomes” (Ning, Lee, & Lee, 2015, p. 338). When teachers observe their peers and allow their colleagues to scrutinize their own practices, they learn to ask questions and can better evaluate their practices (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). In addition, “teachers can more fully understand their students’ performance by comparing them with similar students who are taught the same subjects and given the same assessments” (Hallman et al., 2015, p. 195).

When teachers share their expertise and effective instructional strategies, a shared understanding is fostered and collective professional advancement takes place (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley 1997; Little 2003; Smylie 1995). Meaningful collaboration benefits both teachers and educators. For teachers, collaboration can lead to a shared sense of responsibility for student success and enhance the school’s culture. Students

benefit from collaboration by receiving instruction that is coordinated and specially designed (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). “Within the PLC structure, conversation, contention, and commitment play critical roles. Conversations become the medium of information exchange and the foundation of organizational learning. Contention, when handled productively, exposes differences of opinion and practice and creates space for growth. Finally, commitment ensures that organizational efforts are grounded in a common understanding of purpose and values” (Graham, 2007, p. 3). Research has shown that teachers who are more likely to take risks necessary for change and are more open to group sharing have a greater chance of success when they are collaborating (Harris & Jones, 2010; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

### **Characteristics of Effective Collaboration**

Although there are definitely benefits to professional learning communities, the positive effects of PLCs are often dependent on school demographics and organization factors. A common theme in the literature on the subject “is that all collaborations are not equal—or equally productive” (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 479). Collaborations are often more productive if the teachers who work at schools have certain qualities or backgrounds.

Research has shown that grade level and gender can play a role in collaboration: elementary schools and schools with more female teachers were found to have better quality collaboration (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Race has also been shown to have an impact on whether or not teacher collaboration is effective. “In general, White teachers report lower levels of collaboration quality than Hispanic teachers, who in turn report lower levels than Black teachers” (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 497). The educational

background of teachers can also have an influence on how well teachers work in collaborative teams. “Teachers with different highest degree levels also reported different levels of collaboration. In particular, teachers who had a BA as their highest degree reported stronger collaboration than teachers with other kinds of highest degrees” (Ronfeldt et al., 2015, p. 497). The higher level education a teacher had, the less likely they were to be able to collaborate effectively.

Other factors also were shown to correlate to better teacher collaboration. A study of Chicago elementary school showed that small school size, strong principal leadership, and social trust among faculty all had a positive influence on the professional community (Bryk et al. 1999). The development of a school community that fosters meaningful collaboration depends on “a balance of clear requirements and open flexibility from school leadership, negotiation of personalities within teacher teams, a sense of coherence between PLC activities and individual goals, and the development of new skills in the area of teamwork and collaboration” (Graham, 2007, p. 14). One of the main things administrators can do to improve teacher collaboration is provide more time during the school day for teachers to work together.

A key organizational factor that promotes collaboration is a common planning time for professional development that focuses on collaboration (Spanneut, 2010). In studies done, many of the teachers who were interviewed spoke of the importance of common planning time (Graham 2007). Time within the school day is limited, but “if collaboration is a schoolwide priority, making efficient use of existing time is essential. Administrators can purposefully arrange teachers’ schedules to allow for collaborative team meetings on a weekly or monthly basis” (Ketterlin et al., 2015, p. 53).



District policies can help administrators provide common planning time to their teachers. School district representatives can share “models for creative scheduling to principals and their school leadership teams so that teachers are able to spend greater amounts of time collaborating across grade and content area;” they can also limit the “number of new initiatives introduced in the district so that teachers are not overwhelmed and have the time needed to understand one reform and its components before pursuing another” (Rasberry et al., 2008, p. 7). Having too many district initiatives may present conflicting strategies, “making it difficult for teachers to ascertain what’s best for them and more importantly, their students. Taking on so many initiatives at once does not allow teachers to deeply engage in the work of their PLCs” (Rasberry et al., 2008, p. 6).

How professional learning communities are structured can affect how well teachers are able to work together. The size of the teacher teams is an “important factor in the development and management of conversation and conflict” in professional learning communities; “when there are only two in your PLC, there need to be more ... the PLC needs to be bigger so you can have a majority” (Graham, 2007, p 11). Other ways to more effectively organize PLCs: allowing PLC team members to determine the frequency of meetings; preparing an agenda to outline items for discussion; rotating roles and sharing responsibilities for PLC meeting tasks; preparing teachers to use research evidence; and creating a set of norms for participation and professionalism (Rasberry et al., 2008).

Another important factor that cannot be ignored, when trying to successfully create teacher collaboration and implement programs such as professional learning communities, is the school climate. Research shows that the schools where teachers

really embraced PLCs were the “places where, by and large, positive relationships and practices were already in place before data use was introduced. They were already focused on continuous improvement; even before data use became a priority” (Datnow, 2011, p. 156). They were schools that already had a positive atmosphere, teacher congeniality, and a level of trust established between teachers and coworkers and teachers and administrators.

### Teacher Congeniality

Because there will be inevitably be times when conflicts arise while teachers are working with each other, teacher congeniality (having a pleasant and agreeable nature) is instrumental in addressing and resolving these conflicts. Team congeniality has been seen to be “a significant positive predictor of team collaboration” (Ning et al., 2015, p. 337). In research findings, it was the “extent to which PLC teams were able to develop a level of team community that determined improvements in knowledge, skills, and teaching practices” (Graham, 2007, p. 11). A collegial professional learning committee where “team members trust and respect each other and engage in supportive and productive interactions with one another as professional colleagues is extremely crucial for teachers’ collaborative learning and development” (Ning et. al., 2015, p. 339). In order for a teaching learning team to be effective, team members must be willing to set aside individual differences when engaging in collaborative activities (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas 2006; Webster-Wright 2009). This is known as collectivism.

Collectivism has been defined by Hofstede (2001) as the prioritization of group interests over self-interest, as opposed to individualism which refers to the prioritization

of self-interest over group interest. Professional learning communities require a collectivistic view of the self as an important part of the larger professional network of teachers (Ning et al., 2015). Research shows a correlation between collectivism and team congeniality. “Results from structural equation modelling demonstrated that team collectivism had a positive and moderate effect on team collegiality” (Ning et al., 2015, p. 346).

While collectivism can increase congeniality, power differentials can have a negative effect. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 2001, p. 98). In an ideal situation, “teachers learn from each other as collegial peers. But in reality, teachers may remain conscious of whose opinions hold more weight based on the position the sharer holds at school, and submit to those who are in authority” (Ning et al., 2015, p. 340). Past studies have found that high power distance individuals tend to be more comfortable working in teams with strong leadership and top-down decision-making, but low power distance individuals tend to prefer working in autonomous and self-directed teams where every member is treated as equal and decision-making is more collegial (Earley and Erez 1997; Kirkman and Shapiro 1997; Liu, Wang, Hui, & Lee, 2012). To help reduce power differentials and improve collegial relationships, teachers should be involved in school decision making and policy formulation and be able to exercise their autonomy in professional judgment (Pang, 2003).

### Trusting Relationships

For congeniality to take place more easily, trust is a necessary ingredient in a school. If teachers do not trust each other or their principal, they become self-protective

and are more likely to disengage from collaborative efforts (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). “Relational trust is organized around relationships between teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, and teachers with parents and with their school principal. Each person in these relationships maintains an understanding of his or her obligations and has expectations about the obligations of others” (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2001, p. 83).

One factor that increased trust between teachers in professional learning communities was when “team members treated one another with patience and kindness;” trust was also established when “team members fulfilled their personal responsibilities and assignments” and when team members shared personal information with each other (Hallman et al., 2015, p. 203). Teachers trusted colleagues more when they saw them as competent, professional, and committed to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Once teachers developed a trusting relationship with their colleagues, this “allowed them to feel free to ask for help and to share teaching ideas they felt would improve classroom instruction,” and it also encouraged teachers to share “their students’ achievement data and other information that made them feel vulnerable” (Hallman et al., 2015, p. 206).

While teachers trusting colleagues is important when creating effective professional learning communities, teachers trusting their supervisors can sometimes be even more important, and even more difficult. “The correlation of faculty trust in the principal with faculty trust in colleagues suggests that the principal may set the tone for the quality of relationships among the adults in the building. Where faculty trust in the principal was high, faculty trust in colleagues tended to be higher” (Tschannen-Moran,

2009, p. 240) Principals create trust among teachers by creating working conditions in which teachers have opportunities to use their professional judgment to respond to student needs (Tschannen-Moran, 2009) “Many teachers indicated that the principal would help them build trust in each other and be more effective if she offered them more autonomy” (Hallman et al., 2015, p. 201). Teachers often admire and respect administrators who avoid micromanaging and who involve teachers in team formation (Hallman et al., 2015). When leaders develop trust among teachers, this helps to “assuage [teachers’] concerns about how the data reflects upon them as individual teachers, and [this trust helps] to promote a positive orientation towards data use” (Datnow, 2011, p. 156).

### **Challenges of Mandatory Collaboration**

Whenever a school administration is implementing initiatives that are mandatory, there will most likely be some faculty members that are not happy with changes that are being made. Professional learning communities rely heavily on the use of data to drive instruction and assessment. “While the majority of the educators across the systems seemed to embrace the use of data, district leaders noted that there were pockets of resistance among some teachers;” this resistance increased when “a large wave of reforms and programs implemented all at once” (Datnow, 2011, p. 154). Even if teachers are able to commit to collaborative decision making, meaningful collaboration will inevitably lead to some level of contention (Graham, 2007).

There are ways to make group decisions easier, “including practices such as majority vote, unanimity, or thumbs up,” but some contention will always exist (Graham, 2007, p. 5). When educators are asked to make group decisions, there are bound to be

differences of opinion. When teachers are working toward success on common assessments, it is important that their instruction and curriculum are also aligned. Now teachers are not just dealing with common assessment, they also have deal with different philosophies of teaching and learning (Graham, 2007). If educators feel like they are being forced to participate in instructional practices that go against their philosophy of teaching and learning, not only will contention arise but these teachers could also feel like their professionalism and autonomy are being threatened.

### Undermining Professionalism

Because of the compulsory nature of education, “teaching has not necessarily been considered or treated as a true profession by the public. Indeed, perceptions of teaching as less than a profession are common inside as well as outside of education” (Milner, 2013, p. 1). If professional learning communities are managed too strictly, administrators run the risk of treating their teachers less like professionals and more like parts of a larger machine. “For schools to fulfill their duty to students, a context must be cultivated that is responsive to student needs. This necessitates treating teachers as professionals, granting them discretion, and fostering trusting relationships throughout the school. Adopting a professional orientation is not the same thing as taking a *laissez-faire*, ‘anything goes’ stance where teachers are not held accountable in their responsibilities to students” (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 242). In schools that are less bureaucratic, with principals who did not have an authoritarian leadership style, teachers reported greater professionalism in the behavior of their colleagues (Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

When teachers reported greater levels of professionalism, they “were more likely to take their work seriously, demonstrate a high level of commitment, and go beyond minimum expectations to meet the needs of students” (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 239). In these schools, teachers respected their colleagues’ competence and expertise, were more engaged in the teaching process, worked cooperatively with one another, and were enthusiastic about their work. Instead of administrators controlling all aspects of the professional learning communities, teachers need to take an active role in collaboration and other aspects of the school community. “Teachers should also be strong leaders especially in curriculum, instruction, school and program design, and professional development” (Rhodes et al., 2011, p. 84).

Higher levels of professionalism are correlated with shared leadership where administrators and teachers collaborate to solve common problems and share values and vision with a strong focus on student success (Rasberry et al., 2008). It is important that school administrators think about long-term implications when implementing PLCs. “If we want our schools to function as professional learning communities, then school leaders would do well to resist adopting a bureaucratic orientation, with its implicit distrust, even if these practices would seem to be more efficient in the short run” (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 242).

### Threatening Teacher Autonomy

A large risk when implementing professional learning communities is taking control away from teachers. Some teachers consider “owning their own classroom” to signify autonomy, while other teachers view “the ability to exercise professional judgment” as the definition of autonomy” (Carl, 2014, p. 42). External, political forces

can restrict teacher autonomy. Educators are accountable to the laws and expectations specific to their district (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). If educators are forced to have common curriculum and assessments, then they no longer have the independence that they had in the past. “A perception that teachers are not able to make pedagogic decisions in the classroom that differ from current policy is a threat to agency” (Bodman et al., 2012, p. 15).

If teachers feel their agency threatened, they no longer feel like they are being treated like professionals, but instead “pawns who must be controlled” (Coggins, 2013, p. 44). There has been a strong relationship found between perceived empowerment and professionalism, which would suggest that teachers view their occupation as a true profession when they perceive themselves as empowered (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). If teachers are going to stay committed to the profession, there is a need to give educators “control over their work environment and to have personal on-the-job decision making authority” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 47).

Teachers who do not feel like they are being treated like professionals and who do not have the desired degree of autonomy in the classroom can be significantly impacted psychologically. Pearson’s study demonstrated that as “curriculum autonomy increased on-the-job stress decreased” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 45). When teachers are excluded from policy decisions that directly affect their daily work, this leads to a sense of frustration and disillusionment; it is difficult for teachers to find meaning and purpose in their work when they feel like they are implementing other people’s ideas instead of their own (Coggins, 2013). As the teaching profession transforms, putting more emphasis on students meeting certain standards and practitioners responsible for that



result, “it is important not to get stuck in the old paradigm of command and control that dominated the 20th century—and is still strong today” (Coggins, 2013, p. 45). Teachers need to have some degree of freedom and control in their classrooms.

### Forcing a Scripted Curriculum

Scripted curriculum is the extreme result of an education system pushed toward standardization of teaching practices. “Scripted curriculum is a pre-developed tool that directs teachers on what to say during instruction and when to say it” (Milner, 2013, p. 13). The goal of the scripted curriculum is to improve the test scores for students by creating a curriculum that is supposed to work well for all teachers and all classes. “The push for high test scores undermines the very essence of teachers’ creativity and their ability to be responsive to the particular needs of their students, varying as they do from student to student, year to year, and classroom to classroom. Their ability to draw from and put into practice their professional judgment is compromised” (Milner, 2013, p. 5).

In a classroom where teachers are not supposed to rely on professional judgement but instead on a predetermined curriculum, “the use of scripted and narrowed curricula moves teaching away from professionalization. In this view, teachers are to act as automatons rather than as professionals solving the complex problems of teaching and learning.” This increases the gap between teaching and other professions. “In other professions, professionals are expected to be able to learn from the particulars of their working conditions and use their professional judgment in responding to problems they encounter. Scripted curriculum makes that difficult” (Milner, 2013, p. 15). Teachers who have more control over their curriculum are able to more easily monitor student behavior and adjust their instruction to better meet the needs of their students. Scripted

curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to respond to the context and realities of their work (Milner, 2013).

The use of scripted curriculum can have a detrimental impact on both students and educators. Milner argues that even though “scripted, narrow curricula can serve a valuable role for novice and underqualified teachers and in locations where an articulated curriculum is not available,” it can be a negative for veteran teachers and their students (Milner, 2013, p. ii). “Scripted and narrowed curriculum moves teaching away from professionalization by not allowing teachers to rely on their professional judgment to make curricula decisions for student learning, with the consequent sacrifice of higher-level learning, creativity, flexibility, and breadth of learning” (Milner, 2013, p. i). In Carl’s study, many of the teachers said that scripted curricula did not meet the needs of all of their students (Carl, 2014). Teachers face a moral dilemma when they view the strict guidelines they have to follow as getting in the way of student learning (Carl, 2014). When teachers’ ideas of what is best for students does not align with the strict guidelines of a school or district, this can lead “to internal or external conflict” that can influence their decisions to leave the profession (Torres, 2014, p. 11).

#### Not Addressing Student Diversity

Not all students think alike; not all teachers teach alike. What works in one classroom might not work as well in another classroom. “Students often have different learning preferences. While some students prefer to interact with groups or the whole class, others feel more comfortable working alone. Many students are visual or kinesthetic learners; others are verbal or auditory learners. When differentiation is based on learning profiles, students are provided with opportunities to learn in ways that are

natural and efficient” (Joseph et al., 2013, p. 29). Not only do students have individual differences but so do classrooms. The curriculum and instruction that work with one class may not work with another, even if the two classes are the same subject and academic level.

Teaching is all about monitoring and adjusting to student needs. “Student needs are complex and they are constantly changing, thereby necessitating a perennial adaptation of strategies. Principals’ attempts to improve performance outcomes by instituting standardized, one-size-fits-all procedures often backfire because they strip teachers of the discretion necessary to be responsive to diverse student needs” (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 224). It benefits teachers and students for educators to have “flexibility in content, process, and product based on student strengths, needs, and learning styles” (Levy, 2008, p. 162). There has been recent research indicating that teachers should consciously adjust curriculum and instruction in response to students’ abilities and interests (Joseph, Thomas, Simonette, & Ramsook, 2013).

Standardized curriculum and assessment along with mandatory collaboration can have a deleterious effect on educators. “When we look at the research on how high-stakes testing is affecting US classroom practices, it becomes quite clear that such testing is promoting the standardization of teaching that both disempowers and deskills teachers. For instance, due to the pressures exerted through policies associated with high-stakes testing, teachers are teaching to the tests with increasing regularity, consistency, and intensity” (Au, 2011, p. 30). In order to work against this trend, there is a need for schools to coordinate teachers’ instruction in ways that respond to the academic diversity of their students (Goddard, Goddard, & Kim, 2015). Some inexperienced teachers may

not be comfortable making changes to their instruction, but “if teachers are comfortable in modifying instruction for their students [...], then students should learn more effectively” (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Harden, p. 123).

Standardization can especially threaten English classes, because often different groups of students respond better to certain books. Ivey (2000, p. 44) suggested that “no single method, program, or book will help accelerate the needs of all children or any subset of children. Only knowledgeable, reflective teachers can respond to the diverse and ever-changing needs of individual students.” Students are not equally motivated by all content, so it does not make sense for teachers to “adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction, in which every student is expected to engage the same content similarly and at the same time” (Goddard et al., 2015, p. 114). Students will not have the same motivation to learn if students lack interest in the subjects, or books, taught in school. Engaging students involves knowing the students well and aligning one’s teaching to what motivates them (Morgan, 2014, p. 36).

It is important that “students participate in an education that addresses rigorous content while honoring differences in learners’ prior knowledge, interests, and preferred learning styles” (McTighe & Brown, 2005, p. 236). Offering the same curriculum and instruction to all students is to deny that individual differences exist or matter in learning (VanTassel-Baska, 1997). As McTighe and Brown (2005) say very eloquently in their article, “twenty-first century learning communities are not factories built on assembly-line principles: they are places where shared goals are met by individuals and teams working together to capitalize on the talents and strengths of every member of that community” (p. 243).

### **A Possible Solution: Non-Mandatory Collaboration**

For teachers to be better able to address the needs to diverse students, they need to be able to adjust instruction when necessary. In Carl's study, "the ability for teachers to adjust instruction to best meet the needs of their students is directly connected to their autonomy, the extent to which they were monitored, and their perceived ability to deviate from the curriculum when necessary" (Carl, 2014, p. 44). Teachers must have the freedom to give the best treatment "for their students as doctors/lawyers do for their patients/clients; and the freedom to do such has been defined by some as teacher autonomy" (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005, p. 37). This is especially important with veteran teachers. Teachers with more expertise have more strongly formed opinions about what would be best for students while those with less expertise typically want more guidance (Torres, 2014).

In order to increase satisfaction of educators and decrease teacher turnover, "organizations have to be flexible and responsive to the competing needs and ideas of teachers and students" (Torres, 2014, p. 15). Although research shows the positive effects of teacher collaboration on student performance, if this collaboration becomes mandatory it might result in educators leaving the profession. In schools where teachers are unsure about or disagree with their organization's model, teacher turnover may be higher because of limited teacher autonomy (Torres, 2014). Teachers need to be provided a support structure and a culture in which to collaborate "but also enough autonomy to be able to make decisions and take local action on the basis of their analyses of information about student learning" (Datnow, 2011, p. 157).

“By creating the organizational conditions where teachers can exercise greater discretion in using their professional judgment to respond to the needs of students, principals can foster among teachers stronger professional norms, greater energy and enthusiasm for one’s work, and greater trust in their relationships with students and colleagues” (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 241). For example, instead of administrators having full control over professional learning communities, teachers in PLCs should be able to set their own schedules that work best for their goals and expectations (Rasberry et al., 2008). Teachers should be receptive to sharing but have permission “not to use anything and everything given to [them]” if they feel like it conflicts with their own professional judgment when it comes to the academic interests of their students. If schools do not empower teachers to make decisions, teachers “will disengage from the process” (Graham, 2007, p. 5).

#### Increasing Teacher Passion and Enthusiasm

Research suggests that when autonomy is threatened, a teacher’s passion and enthusiasm for teaching is diminished. Even if an educator came into the academic field with a passion for teaching, this passion could wane if the educator loses autonomy and is forced to teach content that he or she is not as interested in. “A passion for teaching, in general, is not nearly as powerful as when it is combined with a passion for the subject matter” (Breault, 2013, p. 7). One of the risks of mandated collaboration is taking away content choice from educators. This is especially significant with English teachers who have historically had some level of control in their classroom when it came to the literary texts that they wanted to use.

What often separates good educators from great teachers is a passion for teaching. This enthusiasm is passed from teacher to students and helps to make learning more enjoyable and more effective. Zhang's study found that teacher enthusiasm "is an effective predictor of student behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, intrinsic goal orientation, and academic self-efficacy" (Zhang, 2013, p. 52). Frenzel's study had similar findings, noting that "empirical evidence supports the notion that teacher enthusiasm in turn is positively related to both students' motivation and their evaluative reaction to school classes" (Frenzel, Goetz, Ludtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009, p. 706). Increases in harmonious passion, passion about an activity that one freely chooses, were shown to predict increases in job satisfaction and decreases in burnout symptoms over time (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008). The findings of Frenzel's study indicated that teacher enjoyment and student enjoyment are closely linked and that "emotionally positive classrooms are likely successful classrooms. Emotionally positive classrooms enable teachers to best fulfill their teaching responsibilities and to maintain their emotional well-being" (Frenzel et al., 2009, p. 712).

### **Summary of Key Points**

This chapter described the review of literature that was used to support this study. The review of literature investigated the growing focus educators are placing on professional learning communities, the positive outcomes that have been found to relate to teacher collaboration, characteristics of effective PLCs, and challenges that teachers face when participating in PLCs. The next chapter, Chapter 3, will describe the grounded theory design and methodology used to identify significant factors distinguishing characteristics of effective PLCs among high school English teachers.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methods used to conduct the research. The purpose of this study was to determine benefits, challenges, and effective characteristics of professional learning communities according to English teachers in a large high school in South Carolina. It examined English teachers' perceptions of how to engage in teacher collaboration while maintaining autonomy and differentiating instruction. Ten English teachers from grades nine through twelve were interviewed. This study will contribute to the literature on teacher collaboration, teacher autonomy, and professional learning communities. This chapter addresses the study design, the role of the researcher, research questions, the context of the study, measures for ethical protection, participation criterion, data collection, trustworthiness, and data analysis

#### **Introduction**

Qualitative research uses the researcher as the primary instrument of exploration into the study of a certain phenomenon. In this case, the researcher sought to study the “lived experiences of the participants” involved (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, p. 137). The researcher as interpreter interviewed, studied, and made sense of how these participants viewed their teaching experiences as related to teacher collaboration and professional learning communities. Through the study, the researcher gained a better understanding of what they teachers observed and experienced. Qualitative methods thus were more



important in this study to further “capture” the teachers’ individual points of view through personal interviews (p.139). The primary goal was to discover teachers’ perceptions of professional learning communities and teacher collaboration; therefore, it was advantageous to use a qualitative study in grounded theory to discover the authentic factors distinguishing effective PLCs as English teachers saw them.

### **Qualitative Design - Paradigm**

This study sought to gather information from the teachers themselves in order to draw a clearer understanding of PLCs among this subgroup. Because this study examined the perceptions of what English high school teachers saw as factors of effective PLCs, or what they saw as challenges, a qualitative study in grounded theory approach was used. Through personal interviews, themes were identified and analyzed to seek grounded theory in understanding the need for improving teacher collaboration in South Carolina. These personal views allowed the researcher to discover meaningful information connected to the problem and thus direct the researcher to possible solutions. Data was gathered through open-ended interviews.

### **Role of the Researcher in Data Collection**

For this study, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection, interpretation, and analysis. The researcher mediated the data rather than using inventories, questionnaires, or surveys to arrive at grounded theory (Creswell, 1994). Through personal interviews, significant variables distinguishing effective professional learning communities emerged. The purpose of the interviews was to gather information and draw meaningful discussion (from teachers’ perspectives) to identify significant factors that contributed to successful teacher collaboration.

## **Interview Questions**

To understand the significant factors distinguishing successful professional learning communities, the researcher used the following questions to guide the study:

- 1) Please give your age, educational background and teaching certification type, schools where you have taught, and number of years you have taught.
- 2) How did you get into education?
- 3) What is your teaching philosophy?
- 4) What are some of the benefits of teacher collaboration?
- 5) What are some of the challenges of teacher collaboration?
- 6) In your opinion, should teacher collaboration be mandatory? Why or why not? If so, to what extent should teacher collaboration be mandatory?
- 7) Please talk about your experience with professional learning communities.
- 8) In what ways could PLCs be more effective for teachers and students?

Because of the varied school experiences of the teachers and the narratives that were created based on the questions, teachers were interviewed individually. Interviews took place away from Jackson High School when any teachers felt uncomfortable talking about school issues on school grounds. If the teachers preferred to meet on school grounds, interviews took place at the school.

Through the interviews, the researcher gathered authentic data and identified common traits and factors of successful teacher collaboration. Potential challenges and risks associated with mandatory professional learning communities were also investigated. The researcher spoke with the high school English teachers in an environment that was comfortable with the participants. In addition teachers received a consent letter that assured their confidentiality while taking part in the interview process.

## **Context of the Study**

The researcher began the data collection by interviewing ten high school English teachers at a school in South Carolina with a population of around 130,000 people. The population of this school was made up of 51% white students, 40% black students, and

9% of other racial minority students. The school (which will have the pseudonym “Jackson High School”) was 52% male and 48% female, and 29% of students were eligible for free lunch. At the time of the research, there were approximately 80 teachers working at the school, and the student population was around 1300.

At the school, professional learning communities were formed by grouping teachers together based on which classes they were teaching. All the people who were teaching a particular class would meet every Monday after school for an hour. During this time, teachers would talk about creating assessments and developing lesson plans that would best address the academic needs of their students. After lesson plans had been conducted and assessments had been given, the teachers would discuss what was effective. Sometimes in these PLCs, teachers would look at test results to determine which questions were missed more frequently, so that they could better deduce which state standards the students were understanding and which state standards the students were not understanding. At the end of the PLC meeting, a member of the PLC would submit the minutes of the meeting to an administrator.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher approached the prospective participants (eleven high school English teachers) prior to the end of school year 2016 to schedule interviews. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the interview with the researcher, the nature of the study, and the guarantee of confidentiality. Only teachers who had actively participated in professional learning communities were approached. Of the eleven teachers, ten teachers agreed to come for interviews. The researcher developed eleven

open-ended questions for the interview. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by the use of a tape recorder.

### **Measures for Ethical Protection**

Ten teachers agreed to participate in the interview process. Participation was voluntary. Participants were free to refuse to answer any interview question at any time; they were assured that they may also withdraw from participating in the study at any time. The researcher assured teachers of anonymity. Excerpts from the interviews were part of the final research report, but the names of participants were not used.

Pseudonyms for the participants were used.

The data from interviews was held secure through various means. Before and during interviews, teachers were reminded of confidentiality and to try as much as possible not to mention particular names of coworkers. When transcribed, names of coworkers were omitted or replaced with pseudonyms. After audio taped interviews were transcribed, the tapes were housed in a secure location/file within the researcher's office. These tapes will be destroyed after a period of several years.

### **Participants Overview**

Table 2.1

Participants Overview

	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years Teaching	Certification
Participant 1	Olivia	Female	White	5 Years	PACE
Participant 2	Emma	Female	White	1 Year	PACE
Participant 3	Riley	Female	White	9 Years	Standard

Participant 4	Sophia	Female	White	9 Years	Standard
Participant 5	Mia	Female	Black	3 Years	Standard
Participant 6	Liam	Male	White	3 Years	PACE
Participant 7	Ava	Female	White	40 Years	Standard
Participant 8	Charlotte	Female	White	24 Years	Standard
Participant 9	Zoe	Female	White	12 Years	Standard
Participant 10	Aiden	Male	White	22 Years	Standard

### **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

The participants in the study were selected for several reasons. Jackson High School had recently been transitioning from voluntary collaboration to mandatory collaboration, with the implementation of professional learning communities. All of the teachers being interviewed had been actively involved in PLCs, and most of the teachers had taught long enough to not have been involved with mandatory teacher collaboration at some point during their teaching careers. This made it easier for these teachers to identify differences between voluntary and involuntary collaboration.

The researcher chose to focus on English teachers, because in the past English teachers have generally had more curriculum flexibility than teachers of other subject areas. The state standards for subjects like Math, Science, and History line up with specific content knowledge; whereas, the state standards for English are less focused on specific content and more concerned with students acquiring certain skills. In the past, English teachers could pick the literary texts they wanted to use to teach these skills. During the time of the study, there had been a push for English teachers to teach the same

books. Because English teachers have had more curriculum flexibility in the past, this made the impact of professional learning communities more felt by some English teachers and these teachers were more aware of some of the challenges presented by mandatory teacher collaboration.

### **Trustworthiness**

Since the researcher was the primary instrument of the study as stated previously, it was important for the researcher to create an atmosphere of trust with participants. By conducting interviews outside of the regular school setting (when requested by certain participants), a level of comfort and trust was maintained. The researcher also developed a rapport with the teachers/participants during interviews. This was important so that the opinions of the participants regarding professional learning communities could be discovered.

### **How and When Data Analysis Was Analyzed**

Informational data was transcribed from the interviews and compared and organized on the basis of common answers and factors teachers deemed important to effective PLCs. The researcher labelled and grouped factors distinguishing benefits and challenges of teacher collaboration among this subgroup as stated by participants during interviews, discussions, and follow-up member checks. Data analysis was on-going throughout the study. Themes emerged as the data was analyzed.

The three major themes were the benefits of collaboration, the challenges and risks of collaboration, and the perceived characteristics of effective professional learning communities. Within these more general themes, several subthemes developed. The

findings and conclusions of the research emerged through a comparison of these various themes.

### **Summary of Key Points**

This chapter described the grounded theory design and methodology used to identify significant factors distinguishing characteristics of effective PLCs among high school English teachers. The interviews and observations were transcribed, and common themes developed. The next chapter, Chapter 4, will describe the process of obtaining, gathering, and recording data. Through the teacher interviews; patterns, relationships, and themes emerged.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from participant interviews as they related to the research questions composed for this study. The chapter presents the ideas of the participants through interview excerpts; this section is divided by themes that emerged from the interviews: collaboration benefits, collaboration challenges and risks, and characteristics of effective professional learning communities.

The interviews that were conducted are organized by themes and subthemes that arose from specific questions being addressed to the participants of the study. Each subtheme is introduced by a different participant, except for the last subtheme. For the last subtheme, the first participant is reintroduced, because this participant's interview took place in two parts: the first being a face-to-face interview, the second being emailed questions to the participant. When each participant is introduced, a brief biography is included in order to help give a personal context to his/her response. Biographical information regarding the participants is kept fairly general, in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

#### **Thematic Connections**

The first general theme that was discussed by participants was collaboration benefits, which included the following subthemes: sharing ideas and improving curriculum, supporting new teachers, limiting parent complaints, and promoting



professional growth. The second general theme that was discussed by participants was collaboration challenges and risks, which included the following subthemes: teacher resistance or inflexibility, competing teaching philosophies or teaching styles, and interfering with teacher effectiveness. The third general theme that was discussed by participants was characteristics of effective professional learning communities, which included the following subthemes: proper implementation of PLC, teacher-driven PLC, common planning time, and professional autonomy.

#### Collaboration Benefits

The fourth question on my questionnaire asked participants about the benefits of collaboration. Many of the teachers talked about how collaboration encouraged teachers to share ideas and resources with other teachers, and how the sharing of ideas and resources can result in improving curriculum and instruction, which is especially important when providing support to new teachers. Collaboration also helped teachers limit parent complaints, and helped teachers promote their own professional growth.

#### *Sharing Ideas and Improving Curriculum*

Different teachers had different preferences as far as meeting locations. Olivia and I had our interview in a classroom after school hours. Olivia is a white female in her late twenties with both an undergraduate and Master's degree in English Literature, and she received her teaching certification through the PACE program. Olivia has taught five years, the last three years at Jackson High School. Sitting in two desks facing each other, we sit down to discuss the interview questions. Without students in the building the classroom is almost eerily quiet, but at the same time relaxed and pleasant.

Olivia is reserved and focused, answering my questions clearly and concisely, never straying far from the topic at hand. Although a relatively young teacher, Olivia's quiet confident reminds me more of a veteran teacher. I can tell that she takes her job and the success of her students seriously. Olivia tells me that her "goal is to challenge students and to help them achieve their highest goals, or to determine what their highest goals are," and she believes "that all students regardless of background should be given the same opportunities." Olivia feels that collaboration is an effective tool to achieve her goal and the goals of her students.

When I asked Olivia about the advantages of collaboration, one of the first things that she talked about was the sharing of resources. Olivia thinks that "sharing resources is always beneficial." She stated, "Sharing information in regards to how students respond to a specific activity or anything that we do during a unit where there is an assessment, anything at all, that's always beneficial." According to Olivia, the exchange of ideas and resources can help with curriculum development and refining teaching practices.

Olivia elaborated on this idea by discussing a research project that she gave to one of her classes last year. She got together with the other English teachers (who were teaching the same grade level) and they all "agreed that students had a hard time with a specific aspect of the paper, so [the sophomore teachers] were able to redevelop it, and go back to class and teach things a different way." Olivia elaborated:

We all agreed that our students struggled with the annotated bibliography and that many of them had a hard time grasping the purpose of this task. [Another teacher] and I each shared some strategies that we've gradually developed over the years.

Mine involves a list of questions and a step-by-step model. If I'm not mistaken, his involves a list of elements that should be present in an effective annotated bibliography. Following the discussion in our PLC meeting, I chose to incorporate aspects of [his] process into my own strategy, which in effect seemed to heighten my students' understanding. By hearing what was effective in other classes, I was able to readdress the topic at hand with my own students to ensure that they all understood the expectations.

Because of the success of the classroom, Olivia feels that "teacher collaboration should be mandatory." She believes that "sharing resources and ideas widens [teachers'] horizons and allows [them] to break the mold of formulaic or even repetitive teaching." Olivia's colleagues echo her sentiments.

Riley, a teacher who has the same level of students as Sophia, stated, "I would have been okay if we had shared even more with each other, because I love sharing resources and data." She feels that through sharing assessments and ideas, it gives students a more equal level of instruction from different teachers. Riley thinks that "having shared assessments is the way of the future." She believes that "having those common assessments and common skills [...] every quarter is essential for getting [the] students prepared." Riley thinks that it is a good thing "to be fair and to equalize everything across the board."

On the subject of teacher collaboration lending itself to fair and equitable teaching practices, Liam concurs, stating, "I think having shared assessments and having shared texts is a really important thing." He feels it is crucial for vocabulary study and preparing students for the SAT. Liam stated, "I like having the shared vocab in [sophomore

English classes]. I think that was just a core thing that they need in order to be prepared for the SAT and ACT and assessing them all the same way is fair.”

Zoe agrees that collaboration, including sharing resources and ideas, improves curriculum and instruction. According to Zoe, it helps for teachers to reflect collectively on previous lessons in order to improve them. She asks herself regularly, “How can we do this writing lesson better next week? We're not going to do the same lesson, but we're going to go on now to teaching transitions. What was missing here?” After Zoe asks herself these questions, she might be able to determine that she “wasn't clear enough [or] the rubric wasn't clear.” According to Zoe, collaboration also creates accountability. Zoe stated, “I think if you are teaching from a perspective of oh it's just me and the kids than it's a little easier to become lax. It's easier to become lazy.”

The focus on student improvement was a common theme in all the interviews. Mia stated, “For students, I know that as long as ... we meet, look at the data, and whom we gave our kids this assessment, who shared this work, what didn't work and we're focusing on the student learning then we're always going to help make the learning better.” She also agrees with Mia that collaboration positively influences teacher accountability. She stated, “I want to give [the students] the same [assessments] so we know that there are no discrepancies as far as what we're doing.” The concern is that if one teacher is using certain assessments and another teacher is using different assessments, than students might not be given equal learning opportunities or grade evaluations.

Aiden found that sharing ideas and resources was a great way to improve his lesson plans and better engage his students. He talks about a veteran teacher that he used

to work with and how they “collaborated on Othello, and she shared her Othello game with [him], which is basically a review of all of facts from the play, but it's like Bingo.” The students really embraced the new game. Aiden “had kids who enjoyed it who never read anything ever in class, who were following along, and love it. Collaborating with [his former colleague] and getting the game, and finding different ways of doing things” created an extremely successful learning tool for Aiden to incorporate in his classroom.

### *Supporting New Teachers*

Sharing resources and ideas to improve one’s curriculum and teaching strategies is especially beneficial to new teachers. Emma and I sit at a table at the local coffee shop. Last year was her first year teaching and her energy reminds me of how I felt as a first year teacher: a mix of excitement, anxiety, humor, and relief (that she survived her first year). Emma is a white female in her late twenties. She received her undergraduate degree in foreign language, and her graduate degree in literature. She is currently working on her PACE certification.

Although she has just one year under her belt, Emma goals as a teacher are very clear. She wants to be able to “help kids interpret information well in the world around them and to express themselves well, in ways that incorporate higher order thinking and critical thinking skills.” As a result, Emma desires to make her students “better citizens of the world and better members of their community by being able to express themselves well, interpret, and understand things well, and have critical thinking skills.”

While Emma hopes for her students to become contributing members of a global society, Emma is grateful for her school community that helped her get through her first year of teaching. In our interview Emma explains,

There's no way I would have been able to make it through this year had we not had PLCs ... I think one of the reasons that first year teachers have such a hard time is when they don't have support, when they're kind of thrown into a classroom and said kind of like, "Good luck." The PLCs actually were incredibly helpful for me, because I had people who were expected to share with me and whenever I could, I would try to share back.

Emma goes on to say how so many of her colleagues were "very nice and generous about just coming up to [her] and saying, 'Is there anything we can share with you?'" This was a really big help for a teacher just starting out.

Emma explains how the high school environment is a dramatic change from her last work environment in the business sector. She states, "I was walking in from an industry where everyone was trying to hold their closely guarded secrets and was such a relief walking in and ... Everyone is so generous with what they share." This is all the more helpful because, as Emma mentions, "teaching can be one of the most isolating experiences (an irony when [teachers] may be with as many as 150 students per day)" if one does not have a good connection with coworkers. Emma likes having common assessments, because it means having "four people to create questions and find questions for a test bank." She also feels that collaboration "provides accountability, helps us to be our best teaching selves, and provides a sounding board for our ideas and our challenges."

Although Riley is not a new teacher, she is new to the school. She also feels it is really beneficial to have veteran teachers share their resources and ideas. Riley states, "Teacher collaboration is really beneficial for the teachers, as well as for the students."

Riley explains, “I think that for the teachers, it really gives you the benefit of solidifying what you're going to do in your content area.” Riley was able to get affirmation for her ideas, which helped instill a sense of confidence in the classroom. Riley says, “For me, my confidence as a teacher goes up when I know that other teachers are doing the same sorts of things.” She goes on to elaborate, “It helps corroborate the ideas that you might already have - people can affirm, okay that's great, or maybe you could work on this.”

Charlotte, a teacher who had worked at the school for a longer period of time, agrees with Riley and Emma. Charlotte talks about how she and the other freshmen teachers at the school may have collaborated more than other professional learning communities because of having a teacher who was new to the profession and another teacher new to the school. When I asked her about if her group had common assessments and lesson plans, Charlotte responded by saying, “We did, because I think that had to do with the fact that we had a teacher, a new teacher who came in after a few weeks of school [...] She had no resources at all.” Charlotte went on to say, “We just worked together to create common assessments. We did use our PLC time because it was kind of important to stop and say to the two new teachers, and to all four of us, ‘where are you? and what are you doing? And what were our common problems?’ We did have real pressure on us to give common tests.”

Looking back at her first couple years of teaching, Zoe talks about how it is important for teachers, no matter what their age, to get support from their colleagues. She states,

It’s a massive benefit to collaborate with another teacher or teachers. I’ve done it in different ways in multiple settings. One of the things that this comes out of

stemmed from my very experiences teaching; I was 32 going into it. There were assumptions made because of my age that I had experience, which I didn't have ... Nobody offered me any help when I first started.

Zoe stresses the idea that even if a teacher enters the profession later in life, age does not equate to teaching experience, content knowledge, or professional development. It is important that new teachers, regardless of their age, are encouraged to collaborate with their colleagues to better prepare them for the challenges of the teaching.

### *Limiting Parent Complaints*

Riley and I met in her classroom. Riley is white female in her thirties. She majored in English in college, and she also completed a Master's of Teaching at the graduate level. Riley has been teaching for nine years, and this is her second year at her high school; she is upbeat and personable. Her enthusiasm for teaching comes across throughout the interview, but her tone becomes a little less cheerful when we get on the subject of parent complaints. She says, "I hate parent complaints." Riley explains how one of the benefits of collaboration is not the addition of a positive but a decrease in a negative.

At Jackson High School, parents sometimes complain if they feel that one student is not getting the same level of learning or a fair grade in one teacher's class compared to a student in another teacher's class. Riley says,

I think from an administrative perspective, I can see why they want all the tests to be standardized. I think it limits parent complaints. I mean, it could limit parent complaints. It could also parent complaints sky rocket. I think it mostly is an insurance policy for the administration to sort of say, okay, well all ... our



teachers are doing the same rigor in their assessments. Therefore, your child can't switch from [one teacher's class] to [another teacher's class] because they think [the other teacher] is easier.

Riley also explained because her course had an end of the year exam, there was even more pressure from parents. She says, "Because it was an EOC course, we did feel like we needed to be a little more in step with each other because of parents coming in ... we did a lot of the same things in class, as well as the assessments."

Riley acknowledges that parents will probably complain anyway, even if all the assessments are the same. Even with common lesson plans and instructional strategies, there are certain parents who will develop negative feelings toward certain teachers and positive feelings toward other teachers. Riley says, "[Parents are] going to complain anyway. They totally are. You know, it actually is comforting to be able to say in a parent conference, 'You know, we're all doing the same thing. Therefore, I'm sorry, but your child will have to take a test on *The Great Gatsby* and it will have an essay'." But, even if a parent complains, at least with common assessments teachers can more easily cover themselves with administrators who might be concerned about an uneven playing field for different students.

Zoe shares Riley's concern about parent complaints. Zoe expresses a fear felt by many teachers, saying, "It only takes one very vocal parent to destroy a teacher's career." There are certain parents whose dislike for a teacher could result in some serious negative consequences. Zoe talks about another way of addressing parent concerns (besides common assessments), saying, "If we have some structures in place where you have monthly parent meetings where they can air their grievances with the teachers ... I get

that.” In lieu of these meetings, many teachers feel it is safer to stick with common assessments. Mia talks about the problem that could arise if one teacher decided not give the same test as the rest of the group. She says, “We all agreed to have this test and then someone gave a different test, and then there's a parent complaint or something; then it's hard to defend if it was agreed upon earlier.” This concern seems to be especially important to teachers new to the school.

One of the veteran teachers, Charlotte, has seen this situation arise in the past. She was teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, while a former colleague was teaching another text. Even though her colleague was “teaching structure and character development and appropriately discussing theme,” he was still questioned about why he was teaching a different text after a parent complained that the text might not be age appropriate. Charlotte explains, “I think there were different stated objectives for our collaboration last year. That was primarily because parents had a couple kids that might have been friends and so forth, and they wanted to make sure that one teacher wasn't harder or easier than the other one. I think [my coworker and I] were both equally rigorous, but we did approach the topics differently.” A benefit of teacher collaboration is being able to teach the same books, have common assessments, and avoid parents complaining about unfairness (or what they perceive to be unfair).

### *Promoting Professional Growth*

Back at the local coffee shop, I'm sitting across from Sophia. Sophia is a white female in her early thirties. She received her Bachelor's in English at a public university then went straight into the fifth year Master's program for teaching. This is her ninth year at Jackson High School. While we are having our introductory small talk, Sophia is

friendly and relaxed, but once we get on the subject of education her tone is more serious. She expresses her thoughts with the clarity and deliberateness of someone who has spent years reflecting on her teaching practices.

One of the benefits of collaboration that Sophia discusses is the how working with coworkers can promote the promotional growth of a teacher. Collaboration can encourage a teacher to reflect more on their own practices and try new teaching strategies that they otherwise might have avoided. Sophia elaborated by saying,

I think, when I close my door and teach in my room, especially as the year drags on, I tend to fall back on things that are easy for me and aren't necessarily in the best interest of kids. When I get pulled out of that ... get to collaborate with people, it reminds me, "Oh, yeah, there's a strategy that I used to use that I haven't tried in a long time. Why don't we try that? Yes, I like that way of looking at it. Let's do that."

Sophia goes on to say, "I think it really helps me not fall into comfortable familiar patterns and helps me be more dynamic. Then when you're working with other people, you're motivated to share ideas with them as well." According to Sophia, collaboration "has the potential to make everyone more willing to try new things."

Other teachers also talked about being challenged, motivated, and inspired by their coworkers. Liam stated, "I think that collaboration is necessary. I think that it's really healthy; it's good for me as a teacher because I can get wrapped up in my own mind set, not see things from a certain perspective." Zoe has similar sentiments; she explains,

Finding the right person to collaborate with who will both support and challenge your thinking, finding someone who will give as much as you do and who has a similar mind-set about education even while not agreeing completely [is important]. We need a bit of difference to challenge one another.

Mia also talks about how collaboration helps teachers see the “perspectives of other people and how they think.” Although she enjoys working with people that agree with her, at the same time she wants someone who will say to her, “No, I don’t think that works.” She wants someone to challenge her perspective, push her out of her “comfort zone,” so that she can see curriculum and instruction from another point of view.

The two teachers who I interviewed with the most teaching experience, Charlotte and Ava, feel similarly. Charlotte talks about how she liked “getting information from other teachers” and how that information “provides [her] with new tools.” She goes on to say,

I like if we can hash out some philosophical differences. I like to hear from other people. I do think, particularly secondary educators, where we are captain of our own ship, we think that we are right. I think we all think we are right. I think collaboration allows for a more calm or subtle way to remind yourself that you can be a student still, and that you should be a student.

Ava, reflecting on her many years of teaching, talks about how one of the wonderful aspects of teaching is learning from those around you. She says, “I’m here with all these younger teachers, look at how many years I’ve been teaching and so forth, but what can they teach me? The idea is that I have so much more I can learn ... Our giving and taking, we learn from one another.”

Ava talks about how nice it is to talk to coworkers, learn from them, and then return to her classroom and either say, "Hey, I really want to use that" or, if something doesn't quite work, she can always say, "That's not my style" and stick with her formal teaching method. Ava went to a workshop last year where a teacher in North Carolina said, "Two are always better than one." And Ava feels the same way. She says, "I think that is a proverb of life, two are always better than one." Ava and all the teachers I interviewed were able to see the benefits of collaboration, but they were also well aware of the challenges and risks of collaboration.

### Collaboration Challenges and Risks

The fifth question on my questionnaire asked participants about the challenges of collaboration. Many of the teachers talked about how collaboration becomes more difficult when some teachers are resistant to working with others or generally inflexible. This can often happen if teachers have competing educational philosophies or teaching styles. Some of teachers felt that mandatory collaboration could reduce teacher effectiveness, making teachers less capable of addressing the specific needs of individual students or groups of students.

### *Teacher Resistance or Inflexibility*

Mia and I meet in the media center of the school. Mia is an African American female in her late twenties. She majored in English at a small public college, and she received her first master's degree in secondary education from an online university. Mia is currently enrolled in a second master's program for education administration. She has been at Jackson High School for three years. Mia is friendly and professional, coming to the interview with a full set of notes that she prepared. While talking to Mia about her

general teaching philosophy, Mia expresses the importance of teachers “focusing on kids’ goals and dreams and getting to know your kids and what they want to do and helping them understand that they could have [lofty] dreams but they’re still attainable.” Mia thinks collaboration can help students reach their dreams, but she says this can be more difficult if a teacher you are collaborating with is resistant to working with others or is inflexible in his or her instructional approach.

When asked to elaborate on the subject of teacher resistance or inflexibility, Mia explains that “some teachers are not flexible;” they are “not willing to budge” when it comes to their ideas or practices. Mia says it is important for two teachers, who do not see eye to eye, to “not be stubborn and stuck in [their] ways” and be able to say to the other person, “Okay, I still don’t agree but, hey, I’m willing to give it a shot.”

Teacher flexibility is especially helpful when working with larger groups - three or more teachers. Mia states, “I think it’s important for all teachers to be flexible because if this quarter we do something that these two want to do and then if I mention this next quarter then maybe those teachers would be able to say, ‘Okay. We did what we thought was best or what we felt like we wanted to do. Hey, let’s go with your idea on this one,’ kind of thing.” Mia goes on to talk about how it is important for teachers working together to not “be afraid to disagree with someone,” to not be “afraid to say how you feel and be able to express it and still be professional.” Teachers need to be “able to communicate with each other and both parties need to be able to listen.” If this does not happen, collaboration can be very challenging.

Many of the teachers expressed the same concern as Mia. Riley talks about how it is hard to “force collaboration, especially if some teachers aren’t as willing to

collaborate.” Oliva discusses the importance of working with flexible coworkers, stating, “If you're collaborating with people who are willing to collaborate, it's definitely easier. If you're collaborating with people who are willing to make concessions and change the way that they are doing things, then it's definitely easier.” Although Emma has had a good experience working in groups, she says,

I can imagine that if I ended up teaching something else, there's maybe someone that, I don't know, that I really didn't jibe with that maybe it could be extremely frustrating and not as fruitful. In that way, some selection of who you are discussing things with might be helpful. At the same time, I feel like teachers are so good at sharing with each other that I think that we already naturally pair up and say, ‘Oh, I'm doing this. What was it like when you did that?’ I just feel like teachers have a tendency to do that.

Sophia explains how if a teacher is willing to work in groups but not willing to compromise on their ideas or incorporate the ideas of other teachers than “there is that danger of [having] one person whose voice is a little bit more strident than others and who is less willing to compromise. It can get a little uncomfortable” and make for a less pleasant working environment.

### *Competing Philosophies or Teaching Styles*

Liam is a white male in his mid-thirties. He majored in English at a public university, and he earned his Master’s in English and Literature at a liberal arts college. He obtained his teacher license through the PACE program, and this is his third year teaching at Jackson High School. We meet in a classroom at the school. Liam is jovial, witty, and very easy to talk to. As we are talking, we get to the subject of what can make

collaboration difficult. Liam talks about how teachers often have different teaching styles and therefore different approaches to instruction.

If teachers have different styles and different approaches to instruction, that makes lock-step collaboration difficult. Liam stated,

I do acknowledge that we all have different teaching styles, that we approach this differently, which is going to happen because we're human beings and individuals, and we have strengths and weaknesses ... like [one of my coworkers], who is an incredible teacher, is more introverted. She likes a more rigid discussion. Her Socratic seminars are very much geared toward answering certain things and she also might like certain literature that [other teachers] don't necessarily want to teach.

Liam thinks that on a theoretical level Socratic seminars are wonderful, but he feels the students “do need more structure.” He elaborates by saying, “So the more I teach, the more I am coming around to it being a little bit more formal. I do honestly think that things like reflective writing, things like literary analysis, things like class discussion can lead students to a better sense of metacognition and self-knowledge and I try to foster that. That's what I'm aiming for.”

Some teachers have different views on the amount of work students should do in and out of the classroom. Charlotte says that collaboration could fail “when you have teachers who have different philosophies of teaching.” She says, “We did experience that too, which we didn't talk about, but I think you understand that you're going to have people who say, ‘I don't want to have my kids have any homework,’ and I want to say, ‘You're teaching an hour class, so what's the purpose of having no homework?’” Part of



Charlotte's philosophy is that in education it is "imperative that kids get the rigor that they need so that they rise to the challenges ahead of them, which we don't know the shape they will take."

Emma has a somewhat different view on student work load. She says, "I don't necessarily agree with this idea of rigor as the idea of you give your kids as much work as possible [...] In every single place where I've gotten any kind of lessons on rigor, it has said rigor does not equal more work." When teachers have different teaching philosophies, it makes sense that their teaching practices will not be the same. This does not mean collaboration cannot take place, but it is less likely that teachers will have the exact same lesson plans, rubrics, and assessments.

Riley also expresses concern that because teachers have different views of teaching, it can make group work a little more difficult. She says, "Because people have really different philosophies of teaching and different methods of teaching, you can run across, I guess, like resentment for having to like work in these groups, these forced groups." For instance, Riley believes that "teaching should be student-centered and there should be scaffolding for students along the way." She likes "to do a lot of group activities and things like that to just get the students talking amongst themselves." She thinks "the burden of learning should be on [the students], and not on [the teacher]." If other teachers also believe in student-centered teaching, collaborating with Riley is more likely to go smoothly. If other coworkers have a more teacher-centered approach, there might be a greater likelihood of disagreement.

Aiden talks about how it can be a positive for students to have teachers that have different teaching philosophies, because this is more typical in real world work situations.

He says, “Common assessments tie back into the same concept that I will say over and over and over again. In college, in business, for example, with Starbucks, anywhere, you have different bosses. They're different human beings. They may have certain expectations of [their employees and] they do things differently.”

### *Interfering with Teacher Effectiveness*

Ava is a white female in her sixties. She went to a public college in the southeast and received a Bachelor of Science in English Education. She has an MEd in English Education from the same university. She has been teaching close to forty years. She is passionate about teaching, seeing it more of a calling rather than a profession. Ava prides herself on being a life-long learner, and she tries to instill the same love of learning with her students.

Although Ava sees the benefits of teacher collaborating with one another, she does express the concern that if collaboration is mandatory it can interfere with a teacher developing their own identity as a teacher. Without creating one's own sense of teaching style, teachers run the risk of becoming just photo copies of other teachers that they are emulating. If this occurs, often the teaching profession becomes less rewarding and less satisfying. Ava talks about a situation when she first started teaching:

I will tell you that when I started teaching in 1970, I taught eighth grade with [Ms. S] and ninth grade with [Ms. H]. Those teachers had been at the girls' school for a very long time. Here I am, Ava, when I'm teaching, they gave me the test that have already been made, they gave me what I was to be covering. We had six weeks. At the end of the six weeks, I was to give the same test that Ms. S did and I was supposed to teach as much ... I had her as my teacher so I knew how she

taught so I tried to be like Ms. S. Then in the ninth grade, I knew Ms. H, she'd been my ninth grade teacher and so I tried to be like Ms. H. The problem came was that I didn't know who I was and I didn't enjoy teaching [...]

Now that I reflect on it, I was trying to be like Ms. S. I was trying to be like Ms. H and I had to teach the books the same way they did; I had to teach grammar the same way. They're on the noun; I had to be on the noun. If they're on the verb, I have to be on the verb. It's the same thing. I was collaborating with Ms. S; I was collaborating with Ms. H but in the meantime, as a new teacher, I wasn't finding my own voice; I was trying to mimic their voice. If anyone thinks that this type of collaboration and walking in step is new, let me be the first to say it is not new.

I had to do that as a new teacher in 1970.

After this experience, Ava was not sure if she ever wanted “to be back in the classroom again.” Once Ava got her next teaching assignment though, she was given the opportunity to develop her own curriculum and lesson plans and express her creativity and uniqueness. Ava says, “Teachers are creative people. You could never tell Picasso to try to be like Monet.” Her view of teaching went from negative to positive, and because of this she has had a very rewarding and satisfying career in education.

Sophia realizes that like her students, her classes are not all the same, so she does not like the one-size-fits-all approach. She says, “Something that I have to constantly remind myself that I cannot treat my kids, my classes, as one unit. Each kid is an individual with individual needs and then there are real experiences and backgrounds that they bring in. Similar to Sophia, Riley explains how teaching in a lockstep fashion “limits the expertise that you can bring, like from your individual personality to students.

It kind of limits that if you're saying we all have to do it this way. Then, maybe your strength is something else and you're not able to do it that way anymore.” Riley says, “I think when you have a novel that you love ... the students pick up on that and it kind of rubs off on them.”

Aiden also talks about how he is able to enjoy teaching more when he gets to teach the things he wants to teach, and often when teachers get more enjoyment out of teaching, they are more easily able to pass their passion for learning and books to their students. Aiden states, “I absolutely loved teaching Frankenstein with my seniors. I love Frankenstein, I love Othello, I love Beowulf, all these things, and then to be told, “Okay, you can't do these in this order,” or, “You can't do this anymore.” I'm like, “Wait a minute. I'm still hitting the standards, which is ultimately my goal.” When Aiden lost his British literature classes, it not only prevented him from sharing his passion for the subject with those classes, it also had an indirect negative effect on his other classes. Aiden explains, “Even though there were those years that I had the classes I enjoyed and the classes I didn't enjoy that much, I still did better with the classes I didn't enjoy that much because I still had the perk of, ‘Okay, tomorrow or later on this afternoon, I'll get to see that group again and we'll deal with that literature that I love.’”

Many of the English teachers talked about how passion and intensity were important to being more effective teachers and how this passion often came from teaching certain texts. Liam stated,

I think that a big part of teaching, also, is sharing yeah, passion and intensity with students and that sort of thing. Having the four anchor texts and having all the major assessments, and there was that time in the middle of the year they were

moving towards or fanning towards even quizzes being the same, I think that would be a stifling thing. I think that also does a disservice to the fact that students aren't all the same; you're going to have some classes that respond to things differently.

According to Liam, teachers can also more easily address the needs of different classes if they are not required to go lock-step with their coworkers. He stated, "I like teaching certain things and I teach in a certain way and I had one classroom management issues based, needs more rigid instruction section of [a class] and one way better behaved and capable of doing the free-form thinking thing." If collaboration is mandatory and teachers have to teach all the same curriculum and assessments, it becomes more difficult for teachers to adjust their lesson plans to meet the needs of different students and classes. Liam concludes by saying, "I think the collaboration is really important, but I think that it needs to be tempered with just a reasonable understanding of human nature, I guess, and respect for individuality."

Having choices appeals to some of the newer teachers at the school as well. Emma stated, "It is kind of nice, as I'm planning [my class] that I am able to pick and choose books that I know that I can probably teach better because I have more experience with them." Mia talks about how this is particularly important with diverse students. She says that she hates "to bring color into this, but if the majority of [her] students are African-American... [and her coworkers' students] are Hispanic and White, what [she] might read with [her] kids" might be different than what her coworker is teaching to his/her students. With her African American students, she taught the short story, "Everyday Use" which had an "African-American protagonist" that her students could

more easily relate to. She talks about how another class might really like science fiction, so she “would read an excerpt from *1984*,” which is a book in that genre.

Charlotte talks about how English teachers can effectively address state standards even if their classes are not completely in sync. English is not like other classes where the standards are content based; English is more skills based. She says,

ELA is different from other lockstep things where the content is the same, like a science or math content, where you can say, ‘are you teaching structures of a cell this week?’ And then you can say, ‘yes, within a day or two of each other,’ versus a writing process that might take, even in my four sections of English, one of my classes might get it quickly and one might have a whole lot more problems. In particular for me, my last period of the day class seemed to have much more difficulty with writing than my other classes did.

If all English teachers are teaching the same lesson plans at the same time on the same days, it might not allow for the flexibility that Charlotte needs to teach the state standards effectively.

### Effective Professional Learning Communities

The ninth question on my questionnaire asked participants how they felt PLCs could be made more effective for teachers and students. Many of the teachers talked about how proper implementation of PLCs would result in increased effectiveness. A couple of the ways that teachers said PLCs could be implemented better were by letting teachers guide the PLCs instead of administration and creating common planning time for teachers to collaborate. Several of the teachers interviewed also stressed the importance

of keeping some degree of teacher autonomy, while schools were encouraging collaboration and team building.

### *Proper Implementation of PLCs*

Charlotte is a white female in her forties. She majored in Secondary English Education at a public university in the Midwest. She received her M.Ed. in Instruction from a public university in the Southeast. She has been teaching twenty four years - the last two years at her current school. Charlotte is passionate about teaching and this comes across through the intensity by which she talks about her profession and her desire to help her students. Charlotte explains how public schools are especially important, because they help break down class and socio-economic differences among students. She says, "I firmly believe that education is the equalizer in America. I firmly believe that a public education is the bedrock of the civilization." She believes Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be a great part of the public school system, but they have to be implemented in the right way.

Charlotte does not believe that "collaboration should require teachers to teach the exact same way." She says that this might work with "content-specific courses" that have content-based standards, but she feels that "English teachers fall into a different category," because English is more skills-based. She thinks English teachers should have common assessments, "but there should be some latitude as to how [teachers] get there. If [they're] not successful, [she thinks] the PLCs should be held to say what was successful and what was not." Sophia reiterates Charlotte's idea that all the different content areas should not have the same approach to PLCs. She says, "[English] is not a clear-cut as science and math are to me, or even some social studies standards."

Riley also thinks that PLCs are effective if done properly. She says, “I’ve always believed that [collaboration] is a good thing, especially when a PLC is used in the right way.” One thing Riley feels would help would be additional guidance from administration. Riley says, “From the top down would be really nice to have clarified expectations of what we’re doing in our PLC. They always say like you’re supposed to be looking at data. How realistic is that? We really need to be using the time for common assessments.”

Olivia agrees. She states, “I think [PLC] is a positive thing, but it needs improvement.” Olivia explains, “We were told that we were supposed to share data, learn from each other’s practices, and collaborate on curriculum, during PLCs. We accomplished that to a certain extent, but I think we lacked guidance.” Olivia talks about how “the information [teachers at the school] were given initially was not necessarily accurate. [We] were told that we would meet as a department from time to time, and that did not happen after last fall.” Olivia believes that if teachers could actually meet as a whole department from time to time, “where [they’re] given certain goals that [they had] to accomplish in [their] smaller groups”, then professional learning communities would be more beneficial.”

Zoe talks to me about how it would help new teachers to have some system in place that would encourage them to share their ideas. If there was mandatory collaboration between two teachers, it would be helpful to have “some kind of a format where here’s your lesson plan. What is the lesson plan that you’re both going to do? [...] Give it to [whoever the department chair] is going to be.” And then the department chair



could have some input so that both teachers are heard and can contribute to the collaboration.

Zoe also discusses how it would be better to have three or four people in a PLC instead of just two. She explains that for “some people change is difficult. Even when you know it's the right thing [...] there are teachers that no matter how mandatory you make it, are just not going to do it. There needs to be for that reason maybe more than just two people in the collaboration. Maybe there needs to be a three or a four some.” If there are more than two people, the majority can push the agenda of the PLC forward even if a member of the group is not cooperating and, as a result, slowing down the progress of the PLC.

Aiden talks about how it was hard to tell at times who was in charge of the professional learning communities. He says, “I was looking to my department chair for instruction, and then suddenly I'm being given instruction from someone else, and technically that someone else is giving instructions to my department chair. Who's running this show?” Aiden says it would be helpful if PLCs were “a little bit more organized” and if there was someone substituting for the department chair leading the meeting, “the substitute should only run it when the department chair is not able to,” in order to prevent confusion.

### *Teacher-Driven PLCs*

Zoe and I sit down for lunch at a local sandwich shop. Zoe is a 57 old white female. She has a Master's degree in English, and has taught for 12 years in multiple settings: parochial, private, & public in Ohio, VA, CA and now SC. Zoe's teaching in California is particularly relevant to my dissertation topic, because the school that she

worked at was one of the first schools to use PLCs. Zoe stated, “In Berkeley they took it to a whole new level. The way they did this was a very, very teacher led professional development and PLCs. We were able to do that again because within the school of 3000 students we had small learning communities, which started in California. The small learning communities started there ... They have started to evolve more and more and roll out across the country, as do many innovations in California.” Zoe feels that the key to effective PLCs is that they are teacher-driven.

According to Zoe, the PLCs at the school would work better if they were directed less by administration and more by the teachers. Zoe stresses the importance of having “teacher leaders and teacher input” and cutting down on “administrative top down interruptions.” She explains how the “teacher leaders in CA ... met to plan together how [they] would present school-wide goals within [their] PD.” Teacher-driven PLC are beneficial to teachers and administrators alike. Zoe talks about how when administration tries to exert control over teacher collaboration “it's stressful for everybody ... the administrators have too much work to do. The core leaders have too much work to do. Having teacher leaders working together to do evaluations, to sharing best practices, to do PLCs, it just frees everybody up.” Even though administrators are not as involved, Zoe explained how there is still teacher accountability.

Zoe described her experience working with a colleague at her school in Berkley: “We were working together. I would observe her. She would observe me. We had to turn in all of our observations so it wasn't completely without any accountability.” Collaborating with other teachers, without excessive oversight of administration, was both freeing and extremely educational. Zoe stated,

It was so helpful and I remember the year before that I had a woman who was a director of our ELA program who I invited to come to my classroom. I said please come and watch me teach and give me some advice. It was the richest, most helpful thing I've ever done. Because she had expertise in an area that I didn't, which was teaching students, second language students, and I had 50% of my kids were Latino students. Of course any learning you have as a teacher applies to all of our students. She came in and not only gave me feedback at lunchtime or in the planning period after that she would give me feedback about it and suggestions. She also actually taught a class and modeled for me some of the things.

Zoe talked about how this method of teachers observing and learning from other teachers is found in other countries, such as Finland and Japan, which are known for having strong educational systems. In these “more progressive educational systems ... teachers are constantly watching each other and critiquing and fine tuning and sharing best practices,” while in many schools in the United States, “we just don't have the time and the resources.” Instead teachers are required to do too many district-led initiatives “that are top down driven” and, according to Zoe, not as beneficial to teachers or students.

Zoe explains that when teachers have more control at work, they are more inclined to take PLCs seriously. She stated, “When [PLCs are] teacher driven there's teacher buy in. When it's all top down ... Teachers just feel like they have absolutely no agency or control or whatever within.” Zoe blames excessive administrative oversight and bureaucracy on miscommunication the previous year about “the kind of collaboration [they] were supposed to do.” From [the superintendent] down, he pushed forward all of

these curriculum and instruction outlines and the pacing guide,” but the guidelines and teacher expectations were unclear.

Sophia agreed with Zoe stating that teachers should be more involved in decision-making and “PLC should be more inquiry based. You should get to decide what you want to investigate. Do you want to investigate a specific strategy? You all want to try that and then you want to compare results? Do that. You should be driving the direction that your PLC takes.” Aiden took the idea a step farther, saying students should also have a say in the decision making process: Aiden stated, “If we’re going to do professional learning communities, and our ultimate contact is with students, perhaps there should be some form of input from our students on ... ‘Okay, you’re here, you need to learn ... What would you like to learn?’ You and I can shove standards down their throats, and facts down their throats, left and right, but if they don’t ... have an interest, or don’t care, they’re not going to produce.” Even if students and teachers have more input in PLC though, Aiden warned that PLC still will not be effective unless teachers have a sufficient amount of common planning time.

### *Common Planning*

Aiden and I sit down for coffee. Aiden is a 44 year old white male who majored in English at a state university in the southeast. He received his Master’s in Education from a smaller regional school. Aiden taught five years at another high school in the district before coming to Jackson High School, where he has taught for the last seventeen years. Aiden feels that “education starts at home ... The parents instill the sense of wonder, the sense of learning. Whether it be picking up rocks and looking at them and seeing what they are ... or reading and wanting them to learn more.” Even though Aiden

stresses the importance of parent involvement in a child's education, he definitely feels that teachers play a crucial role also, and, in order for teachers to provide the academic support necessary for a student's intellectual development, teachers need to be provided common planning time for collaboration.

Aiden is a proponent of collaboration, but he feels that there is often just not enough time allocated for teachers working together. Aiden stated, "Collaborating, and sitting down and talking to other teachers is a wonderful tool, when we're able to do it. Unfortunately, we have to do it either after school, or during." At Jackson High School, PLC is often limited to after-school once a week. Aiden explains one problem with this setup: "if you're teaching more than one level of English, or more than one course, whether it be AP, IB, etc, I cannot be in more than one meeting at a time."

Riley and Emma echo Aiden's sentiments. Riley had multiple classes that were shared planning with other teachers. She states, "I just remember, like at the beginning of the year, I went to [one PLC] much more because I had three sections of [one class] and two sections of [the other class]. Then, I realized that the [other PLC] was making decisions on things without me there." Emma was in a similar situation. She stated, "I think time is one of the most frustrating parts about it, in the way that it's like you are required to take this time to do this. I think in some ways ... Either on your own time if you're teaching several classes with someone, you know? It is like now I've got to find time to talk with both PLCs." The solution to the problem expressed by Aiden, Riley, and Emma is common planning time during the school day.

Every teacher is given one planning period a day. If the administrators and guidance counselors who created the teaching schedule were able to give common

planning periods to teachers who taught the same classes, this would give teachers exponentially more time to collaborate. Riley says, “I think if we had more time to sort of really collaborate and talk about data and talk about common planning, I think that would be super helpful. A lot of times last year, we didn't have the time. We didn't have a common planning period.” She goes on to say, “If we're supposed to have common assessments, and that's what we ended up using the time for, but for them to say we need to be looking at data, there is just not enough time to look at data and do common assessments and be in lock set planning.” Liam agrees, “The lack of a shared planning period is a big deal ... I think a planning period together would be pretty great.”

Zoe identifies one problem with after-school planning, indicating that teachers' energy levels are naturally low at the end of the day. She stated that it is important to have collaborate planning time that “is built into the school day instead of having it after school. Because [she thinks] at the end, after school everyone's really tired, everyone's eager to leave and not as likely to get as much accomplished.” She goes on to say, “Collaboration can only be mandatory if time is built into our schedules to make it realistic. Rather than mandatory I would use the term integral. When it is added on within an already too tight schedule, it is impossible to maintain with integrity.”

Sophia also thinks that “it's hard to carve time out of the day if you don't have common planning.” Especially if schools are expecting teachers to become more and more lockstep with teach other. Sophia stated, “There's not enough time for [collaboration] especially if the intent of the collaboration is for you to all teach the same way, the same page, same book, same day philosophy that some favor.” Emma likes the idea of a common planning period, but she also thinks that additional time could be set

aside during the school day for collaboration. Emma stated, “There's so much opportunity to build times for collaboration into a schedule that would allow it to be a little more autonomous and give people a little bit more agency to do it. I love the idea of not just having a planning, but maybe having a time for collaboration where you could collaborate.” All the teachers agreed that some sort of additional common planning time would be beneficial for collaboration.

### *Professional Autonomy*

After finishing up my interview with Olivia, I listened to the recording of the interview and felt that there were some responses that I would really like Olivia to elaborate on. I emailed her a few follow-up questions, and she responded promptly. Her email touched on the topic of professional autonomy for teachers. Early in this chapter I talked about how one of the risks of mandatory collaboration is the stifling of teacher creativity. In the same vein, I think in order for a PLC to be run effectively, autonomy needs to part of the equation. Olivia sums this up well, saying,

I do not believe that all teachers should be expected to teach identically, or in a lock-step manner. In return, teachers should be given the freedom to choose how or whether they would like to use the resources and ideas that their colleagues share with them. In other words, teacher collaboration should not be presented as an unavoidable chore or a forced marriage of sorts, but as an opportunity to improve our practices “with a little help from [our] friends” (Lennon and McCartney).

Emma agrees, saying, “I think [PLCs] should probably be facilitated, but not mandatory.” Sophia does think collaboration should be mandatory, but also thinks “we need to take

away that lock-step thing.” Having collaboration that is lock-step, where teachers have the same curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments I think is particularly frustrating to English teachers.

A lot of the joy English teachers get is from teaching a book that they find is meaningful to them. Through their love of a particular book, they can more easily engage with their students and teach the skills necessary to improve the reading and writing of their students. Most of the English teachers interviewed seem to agree that PLC would be more effective if they had more autonomy in their classroom, particularly in relation to the books they teach. Riley explains, “I don’t think you need to be teaching the same novel to be teaching the same skills ... I think assessments should be skills based and because English is like a recursive skill. You’re going back and doing these same skills over and over again.” She goes on to say, “I don’t think that we should have to teach the same novels because teachers are passionate about certain books.”

Ava has the same opinion of teaching the state English standards using different novels. She said, “I think you can teach totally different books. I liked it when you can teach totally different books but you’re teaching the standards ... The standards we’re teaching, whatever it is the district wants us to do, whatever standards in writing, in reading, in critical thinking or whatever, we can do that in five different books.” Ava explains how students “can write an argumentative paper about *To Kill a Mockingbird* or [they] can do an argumentative paper about *Invisible Man* or about *The Color Purple* or whatever.” Ava talked about how teachers are expected to respect students’ individuality and uniqueness, and she feels that the same thinking should be applied to teachers.



### **Summary of Key Points**

Chapter 4 provided processes by which the data were gathered, and recorded how the design was developed, and a discussion of patterns and themes that emerged. Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the study, the findings, and implications as well as recommendations for further study. According to the findings from this study, the public school system must continue to provide teachers with some sense of autonomy as well as providing various opportunities for collaboration with their colleagues. Through these continued efforts and support, teachers can more effectively address the academic needs of their students.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter 4. This chapter begins with a restated purpose of study, which includes a brief synopsis of the participants involved in the study. The chapter then offers a summary of the results and discusses the findings in relation to existing literature. Lastly, the chapter gives recommendations for future research, and presents a conclusion of the study.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the benefits, challenges, and effective characteristics of professional learning communities according to English teachers in a large high school in South Carolina. It examined English teachers' perceptions of how to best engage in teacher collaboration while maintaining autonomy and differentiating instruction. Ten English teachers from grades nine through twelve were interviewed. This study contributes to the literature on teacher collaboration, teacher autonomy, and professional learning communities.

All of the teachers who were interviewed had been actively involved in PLCs, and most of the teachers had taught long enough to not have been involved with mandatory teacher collaboration at some point during their teaching careers. The researcher chose to focus on English teachers, because in the past English teachers have generally had more

curriculum flexibility than teachers of other subject areas. The state standards for subjects like Math, Science, and History line up with specific content knowledge; whereas, the state standards for English are less focused on specific content and more concerned with students acquiring certain skills. In the past, English teachers could pick the literary texts they wanted to use to teach these skills. Currently, there is a push for English teachers to teach the same books. Because English teachers have had more curriculum flexibility in the past, English teachers are probably more aware of some of the challenges presented by mandatory teacher collaboration.

### **Results in Relation to Prior Research**

Overall, the study I conducted supports prior research. For the most part, the Professional Learning Communities created at Jackson High School fit the general description of PLCs found in existing literature on the subject. Graham's article indicated that in PLCs, "teachers are typically organized into specific teams within a professional learning community whether these teams are based on grade level, subject area, or an area of professional interest; and these teams are given time during the school day to meet and converse" (2007, p. 4). The English teachers I interviewed were likewise organized into specific teams based on subject area. Although the teachers were not given time during the school day to meet, they were given time after school every Monday. The participants of the study addressed many of the benefits and challenges of collaboration discussed in the existing literature, and they also proposed some of the same ideas for creating more effective PLC.

## Collaboration Benefits

Many of the benefits of collaboration, and, more specifically, professional learning communities, that were found in existing literature were echoed by the participants in my study, especially when it came to teachers using collaboration as a way to share their ideas, improve their curriculum, and promote their professional growth. My study expands on existing literature in regards to how collaboration is particularly beneficial to new teachers, and how collaboration is an effective means of deterring some parent complaints.

### *Sharing Ideas and Improving Curriculum*

Existing literature has shown that teachers can use collaboration to share ideas and improve curriculum. At Jackson High School, the PLCs were “focused around a specific purpose, such as creating a common assessment, discussing and comparing student work samples in order to ensure consistent grading practices, or using assessment data to identify effective teaching practices” (Graham, 2007, p. 3). Zoe talked about how she would talk to other teachers in her PLC about how they could do a “writing lesson better next week” or improve a “rubric [that] wasn’t clear.” She said as long as teachers meet, look at the data, and focus on student learning they are going to improve learning for their students.

Past studies have shown that the exchange of ideas that occurs during collaboration can benefit both teachers and students. For teachers, collaboration can lead to a shared sense of responsibility for student success and enhance the school’s culture. Students benefit from collaboration by receiving instruction that is coordinated and specially designed (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). This was illustrated in the interview

with Olivia, who talked to other teachers who taught her subject, and they “all agreed that [their] students struggled with the annotated bibliography” of a paper the students were writing, so all the teachers in the PLC “shared some strategies that [they had] gradually developed over the years.” By hearing what was effective for other teachers, Olivia “was able to readdress the topic ... with [her] own students to ensure that they all understood the expectations” of the assignment.

In their research, Rasberry et al discussed how teachers use PLCs in attempt to better meet the needs of their students by engaging in deeper learning through collaboration (Rasberry et al, 2008). In accordance with this idea, English teachers interviewed in the study would use their time in PLCs to engage “in substantive conversations about issues related to teaching and learning. Through these conversations, [the teachers would] share instructional strategies, make decisions about curriculum and assessment practices, and analyze student achievement data” (Graham, 2007, p. 11). As a result of these conversations, the teachers that I interviewed learned from one another and tried to make improvements in what they taught and how they taught it. Aiden talked about sharing ideas with a veteran teacher and how the two of them “collaborated on Othello,” the veteran teacher sharing “her Othello game with [him].” Collaborating with his colleague, Aiden was more effectively able to engage his students.

In his study, Graham explained how “within the PLC structure, conversation, contention, and commitment play critical roles. Conversations become the medium of information exchange and the foundation of organizational learning. Contention, when handled productively, exposes differences of opinion and practice and creates space for growth. Finally, commitment ensures that organizational efforts are grounded in a

common understanding of purpose and values” (2007, p. 3). Riley and Liam both talked about the importance of teachers having a common understanding of purpose and values. Riley discussed the importance of the teachers in her PLC teaching “common skills every quarter” in order to get their students better prepared to analyze the literature that they are reading in class, such as *The Great Gatsby* and *The Crucible*. Liam agreed, saying that it was also crucial for preparation of the SAT and ACT to have “shared vocabulary in [their sophomore English classes]” and assess students “all the same way.”

### *Promoting Professional Growth*

Studies have shown that collaboration can also promote the professional growth of teachers. Bryk, Cambum, & Louis conducted research that indicated that when teachers observe their peers and allow their colleagues to scrutinize their own practices, they learn to ask questions and can better evaluate their practices (1999). Sophia talked about how when she collaborates with other teachers it reminds her of strategies that she has used in the past that she hasn’t “tried in a long time,” and she is less likely to “fall back on things that are easy for [her but] aren’t necessarily in the best interest of [her] kids.” She went on to say how collaboration helps her “not fall into comfortable patterns and helps [her to] be more dynamic.” Liam and Zoe agreed. In his interview, Liam stated, “I think that collaboration is necessary. I think that it’s really healthy; it’s good for me as a teacher, because I can get wrapped up in my own mind set, not seeing things from a certain perspective.” Zoe talked about the importance of “finding the right person to collaborate with who will both support and challenge your thinking. Finding someone who will give as much as you do and who has a similar mindset about education even

while not agreeing completely.” She went on to say, “We need a bit of difference to challenge one another.”

Existing literature indicates that when teachers become part of professional learning communities, they begin to approach teaching from a different perspective, utilizing new strategies. “In PLCs, teams are open to critical thinking, reflective dialogue, self-examination, and resolving issues that impede student success. Each member must be committed to the time, energy, and collaboration required to bring about lasting change in their classrooms and school” (Rasberry et al., 2008, p. 2). Through self-examination and constructive feedback of others, Charlotte felt that collaboration helped promote professional growth. Charlotte talked about “getting information from other teachers” and how that information “provides [her] with new tools.” She embraced competing ideas, saying, “I like if we can hash out some philosophical difference. I like to hear from other people ... I think collaboration allows for a more calm and subtle way to remind yourself that you can be a student still, and that you should be a student.”

#### *Helping New Teachers and Deterring Parent Complaints*

Two benefits of collaboration that participants discussed, that I did not find as much evidence of in existing research, was how collaboration could really help new teachers and teachers who were having difficulty with critical parents. Emma, who had just finished her first year teaching, talked extensively about how much PLC helped her survive her first year. She stated, “There’s no way I would have been able to make it through this year had we not had PLC ... I think that one of the reasons that first year teachers have such a hard time is when they don’t have support.” She explained how she came from an “industry where everyone was trying to hold their closely guarded secrets,”

so it was a relief when she came to the school and “everyone [was] so generous with what they share.”

Riley had problems in the past with parents who would scrutinize her teaching in comparison to other teachers who taught the same subject. Collaborating with other teachers, sharing curriculum units and lesson plans, and coming up with common assessments helped to alleviate the potential for conflict with parents. Riley said when all the tests are standardized it can “limit parent complaints,” so administrators could show that the people teaching the same subjects “are doing the same rigor in their assessments.” Teaching an EOC course, she felt even more pressure “to be a little more in step” with other teachers.

#### Collaboration Challenges and Risks

Many of the challenges and risks of collaboration and, more specifically, professional learning communities that were found in existing literature were discussed by the participants in my study: teachers sometimes were resistant to collaborative efforts if the philosophies or styles of colleagues did not match their own; and teachers sometimes felt that the mandatory collaboration made them less effective, especially if becoming lockstep with other teachers took away from their professional identity or interfered with them addressing the specific needs of their students. My study expands on existing literature in terms of how collaboration can be particularly challenging to English teachers, when mandatory collaboration threatens to take away the novels that are the best fit for that particular teacher’s style and instructive goals.



### *Teacher Resistance or Inflexibility*

Past research discussed how whenever a school administration is implementing initiatives that are mandatory, there will most likely be some faculty members that are not happy with changes that are being made. Professional learning communities rely heavily on the use of data to drive instruction and assessment. “While the majority of the educators across the systems seemed to embrace the use of data, district leaders noted that there were pockets of resistance among some teachers;” this resistance increased when “a large wave of reforms and programs [were] implemented all at once” (Datnow, 2011, p. 154). Even if teachers are able to commit to collaborative decision making, meaningful collaboration will inevitably lead to some level of contention (Graham, 2007). The participants of the study discussed this challenge as well. Mia talked about how “some teachers are not flexible,” that they are not willing to budge” when it comes to their ideas or their practices. She explained that in order for collaboration to work it is important for teachers “not to be stubborn and stuck in [their] own ways.”

Many of the teachers expressed the same concern as Mia. Riley talked about how hard it was to “force collaboration, especially if some teachers aren’t as will to collaborate.” Olivia discussed the importance of working with flexible coworkers, stating, “If you’re collaborating with people who are willing to collaborate, it’s definitely easier. If you’re collaborating with people who are willing to make concessions and change the way that they are doing things, then it’s definitely easier.” Sophia explained how if a teacher is willing to work in groups but not willing to compromise on their ideas or incorporate the ideas of other teachers then “there is that danger of [having] one person whose voice is a little bit more strident than others and who is less willing to

compromise. It can get a little uncomfortable” and make for a less pleasant working environment.

Existing literature has shown that when educators are asked to make group decisions, there are bound to be differences of opinion. When teachers are working toward success on common assessments, it is important that their instruction and curriculum is also aligned. Now teachers are not just dealing with common assessment, they also have deal with different philosophies of teaching and learning (Graham, 2007). If an educator feels like they are being forced to participate in instructional practices that go against their philosophy of teaching and learning, not only will contention arise but these teachers could also feel like their professionalism and autonomy are being threatened. Liam discussed this in his interview, explaining how teachers “all have different teaching styles.” He talked about how one of the members in his PLC is “more introverted” and likes “more rigid discussion.” As a result, her Socratic seminars are delivered in a different manner than his. Because of their own preferences and styles, there are also certain books that each person wants to teach.

Charlotte also talked about how collaboration can fail “when you have teachers who have different philosophies of teaching.” She discussed how some teachers may want to give more homework, and some teachers might not want to give any homework. Charlotte believes in giving homework to her students, because part of her philosophy is that in education it is “imperative that kids get the rigor that they need so that they rise to the challenges ahead of them, which we don’t know they shape they will take.” Emma, on the other hand, had a different view of student workload, saying, “I don’t necessarily agree with this idea of rigor as the idea of you give your kids as much work as possible

... in every single place where I've gotten any kind of lessons on rigor, it has said rigor does not equal more work."

### *Interfering with Teacher Effectiveness*

My literature review indicated that employees' level of job satisfaction often diminishes if they feel like they do not have much control in their working environment. Teacher autonomy specifically is "a critical component in the motivation of teachers to stay or leave the teaching profession" (Pearson & Moowaw, 2005, p. 41). If teachers feel like they do not have the freedom to adjust their curriculum and instruction in order to better engage their students, this can bring out feelings such as anger, anxiety, and burnout which are large factors that can result in teachers dropping out of the profession (Hughes, 2001).

Prior research has looked at scripted curriculum, which is the extreme result of an education system pushed toward standardization of teaching practices. "Scripted curriculum is a pre-developed tool that directs teachers on what to say during instruction and when to say it" (Milner, 2013, p. 13). The goal of the scripted curriculum is to improve the test scores for students by creating a curriculum that is supposed to work well for all teachers and all classes; but "the push for high test scores undermines the very essence of teachers' creativity and their ability to be responsive to the particular needs of their students, varying as they do from student to student, year to year, and classroom to classroom. Their ability to draw from and put into practice their professional judgment is compromised" (Milner, 2013, p. 5).

When she was a new teacher, Ava almost left the profession, because she was told that she had to teach exactly like a veteran teacher. She explained, "The problem came

was that I didn't know who I was and I didn't enjoy teaching." Ava went on to say, "I wasn't finding my own voice, I was trying to mimic their voice." After this experience, Ava was not even sure if she wanted "to be in the classroom again." It was not until she got her next teaching assignment (and had more autonomy in the classroom), that she decided to stay in the profession. Her view of teaching went from negative to positive, and because of this she has had a very rewarding and satisfying career in education.

Research has shown that teachers need to "adjust their instructional style to reflect the needs of their students" (Levy, 2008). In Carl's study, many of the teachers said that scripted curricula did not meet the needs of all of their students (Carl, 2014). Sophia talked about this in her interview. Sophia realized that neither her students nor her classes are all the same, so she did not like the one-size-fits-all approach. She stated, "Something that I have to constantly remind myself and that I keep forgetting the longer I teach is that I cannot treat my kids, my classes, as one unit. Each kid is an individual with individual needs." Similar to Sophia, Riley explained how teaching in a lockstep fashion "limits the expertise that you can bring from your individual personality to students." Riley thought this was especially true when it came to which books she wanted to teach and how she wanted to teach that particular book.

The concerns of Sophia and Riley are found in existing literature. In their research, Joseph et al. discussed how "students often have different learning preferences. While some students prefer to interact with groups or the whole class, others feel more comfortable working alone. Many students are visual or kinesthetic learners; others are verbal or auditory learners. When differentiation is based on learning profiles, students are provided with opportunities to learn in ways that are natural and efficient" (2013, p.

29). Tschannen-Moran also discussed how teaching is all about monitoring and adjusting to student needs: “Student needs are complex and they are constantly changing, thereby necessitating a perennial adaptation of strategies. Principals’ attempts to improve performance outcomes by instituting standardized, one-size-fits-all procedures often backfire, because they strip teachers of the discretion necessary to be responsive to diverse student needs” (2009, p. 224).

Research also shows that it benefits teachers and students for educators to have “flexibility in content, process, and product based on student strengths, needs, and learning styles” (Levy, 2008, p. 162). According to Liam, teachers can more easily address the needs of different classes if they are not required to go lock-step with coworkers. He stated, “I like teaching certain things and I teach in a certain way, and I had one classroom management issues based, needs more rigid instruction section of English II honors and one way better behaved and capable of doing free-form thinking.” It was important for Liam that he was given the flexibility to address the different needs of the two dissimilar classes.

#### *Limiting Content Selection*

Existing literature discussed how standardization can especially threaten English classes, because often different groups of students respond better to certain books. Ivey (2000, p. 44) suggested that “no single method, program, or book will help accelerate the needs of all children or any subset of children. Only knowledgeable, reflective teachers can respond to the diverse and ever-changing needs of individual students.” Aiden talked about how he is able to enjoy teaching more when he gets to teach certain novels (like *Frankenstein*, *Othello*, and *Beowulf*), and often when teachers get more enjoyment out of

teaching, they are more easily able to pass their passion for learning and books to their students.

Mia talked about how it was important to match the novel she taught with the interests of particular groups. She explained how “the majority of [her] students are African-American,” so the stories that she taught in her class often had African-American protagonists (such as the short story, “Everyday Use”) that her students could more easily relate to. She talked about how if she had another class that was really into science fiction, she would be more likely to teach a book like *1984*. Mia’s perspective reflects Morgan’s research that discusses how engaging students involves knowing the students well and aligning one’s teaching to what motivates them (2014, p. 36). It is important that “students participate in an education that addresses rigorous content while honoring differences in learners’ prior knowledge, interests, and preferred learning styles” (McTighe & Brown, 2005, p. 236).

Charlotte talked about how English in particular lends itself to a greater degree of teacher autonomy and flexibility because the standards are skills-based and not content-based. She stated in her interview, “ELA is different from other lockstep things where the content is the same, like a science or math content, where you can say, ‘are you teaching structures of a cell this week?’ And then you can say, ‘yes, within a day or two of each other,’ versus a writing process that might take, even in my four sections of English, one of my classes might get it quickly and one might have a whole lot more problems. In particular for me, my last period of the day class seemed to have much more difficulty with writing than my other classes did.” This reflects the research of Van Tassel-Baska whose research conveyed the idea that offering the same curriculum and

instruction to all students is to deny that individual differences exist or matter in learning (1997).

### Characteristics of Effective PLCs

Many of the characteristics of professional learning communities that were found in existing literature were discussed by the participants in my study. They discussed the importance of implementing PLCs properly, creating common planning time, and promoting professional autonomy among teachers. Professional autonomy was also linked to teacher passion and, consequently, student engagement.

### *Proper Implementation of PLCs*

Past studies on PLCs have shown that how professional learning communities are structured can affect how well teachers are able to work together. The size of the teacher teams is an “important factor in the development and management of conversation and conflict” in professional learning communities; “when there are only two in your PLC, there need to be more ... the PLC needs to be bigger so you can have a majority” (Graham, 2007, p 11). Zoe discussed in her interview how it would be better to have three or four people in a PLC instead of just two. She explained that for “some people change is just difficult.” She said, “Even when you know it’s the right thing [...] there are teachers that no matter how mandatory you make it, are just not going to do it. There needs to be for that reason maybe more than just two people in the collaboration. Maybe there needs to be three or four.” If there are more than two people, the majority can push the agenda of the PLC forward even if a member of the group is not cooperating and, as a result, slowing down the progress of the PLC.

Other factors conveyed in the existing literature were also shown to correlate to better teacher collaboration. A study of Chicago elementary school showed that small school size, strong principal leadership, and social trust among faculty all had a positive influence on the professional community (Bryk et al. 1999). The development of a school community that fosters meaningful collaboration depends on “a balance of clear requirements and open flexibility from school leadership, negotiation of personalities within teacher teams, a sense of coherence between PLC activities and individual goals, and the development of new skills in the area of teamwork and collaboration” (Graham, 2007, p. 14). One thing Riley discussed in her interview was how helpful it would be to get additional guidance from administration. Riley said, “From the top down, it would be really nice to have clarified expectations of what we're doing in our PLC.” Olivia agreed. She stated, “We were told that we were supposed to share data, learn from each other's practices, and collaborate on curriculum, during PLCs. We accomplished that to a certain extent, but I think we lacked guidance.” Olivia talked about how “the information [teachers at the school] were given initially was not necessarily accurate. [They] were told that [they] would meet as a department from time to time, and that did not happen after last fall.” Olivia believed that if teachers could actually meet as a whole department from time to time, “where [teachers are] given certain goals that [they] have to accomplish in [their] smaller groups”, then professional learning communities would be more beneficial.”

In their research, Rasberry et al. discussed other ways to more effectively organize PLCs: allowing PLC team members to determine the frequency of meetings; preparing an agenda to outline items for discussion; rotating roles and sharing



responsibilities for PLC meeting tasks; preparing teachers to use research evidence; and creating a set of norms for participation and professionalism (Rasberry et al., 2008). In her interview, Zoe also talked about how the PLCs at Jackson High School would work better if they were directed less by administration and more by the teachers. Zoe stressed the importance of having “teacher leaders and teacher input” and cutting down on “administrative top down interruptions.” She explained how the “teacher leaders [at her former school] in California ... met to plan together and how [they] would present school-wide goals within [their] PD.” Zoe talked about how when administration tries to exert control over teacher collaboration “it's stressful for everybody ... the administrators have too much work to do. The core leaders have too much work to do.” She said, “Having teacher leaders working together to do evaluations, to sharing best practices, to do PLCs, it just frees everybody up.” Even though administrators were not as involved, Zoe explained how there was still teacher accountability.

Zoe explained that when teachers have more control at work, they are more inclined to take PLCs seriously. She stated, “When [PLCs are] teacher driven, there's teacher buy in. When it's all top down ... teachers just feel like they have absolutely no agency or control. Zoe blamed excessive administrative oversight and bureaucracy on miscommunication about “the kind of collaboration [they] were supposed to do. From [the superintendent] down, he pushed forward all of these curriculum and instruction outlines and the pacing guide,” but the guidelines and teacher expectations were unclear.

#### *Common Planning Time*

Although there is abundant evidence that communication among teachers, and between teachers and students, helps improve student achievement, research has shown

that using data to guide instruction is time intensive and can add to a teacher's already large workload (Datnow, 2011). One of the main things administrators can do to improve teacher collaboration is provide more time during the school day for teachers to work together. A key organizational factor that promotes collaboration is common planning time for professional development that focuses on collaboration (Spanneut, 2010). Even though Aiden was a proponent of collaboration, he felt that there was often just not enough time allocated for teachers working together. In his interview Aiden stated, "Collaborating, and sitting down and talking to other teachers is a wonderful tool, when we're able to do it. Unfortunately, we have to do it either after school, or during." At the high school where Aiden works, PLC is often limited to after-school once a week. Aiden explains one problem with this setup: "if [people are] teaching more than one level of English, or more than one course, whether it be AP, IB, etc, [they] cannot be in more than one meeting at a time." This is where common planning time would be beneficial.

In studies done, many of the teachers who were interviewed spoke of the importance of common planning time (Graham 2007). Time within the school day is limited, but "if collaboration is a schoolwide priority, making efficient use of existing time is essential. Administrators can purposefully arrange teachers' schedules to allow for collaborative team meetings on a weekly or monthly basis" (Ketterlin et al., 2015, p. 53). Riley shared this perspective, saying, "I think if we had more time to sort of really collaborate and talk about data and talk about common planning, I think that would be super helpful. A lot of times last year, we didn't have the time. We didn't have a common planning period. She went on to say, "If we're supposed to have common assessments, and that's what we ended up using the time for, but for them to say we need to be looking

at data. There's just not enough time to look at data and do common assessments and be in lock set planning.” Liam agreed saying, “The lack of a shared planning period is a big deal ... I think a planning period together would be pretty great.”

Zoe identified one problem with after-school planning, indicating that teachers’ energy levels are naturally low at the end of the day. She stated that it is important to have collaborate planning time that “is built into the school day instead of having it after school,” because at the end of the school day everyone is tired and ready to go home, so they are “not as likely to get as much accomplished.” She went on to say, “Collaboration can only be mandatory if time is built into our schedules to make it realistic.”

Sophia also thought that “it’s hard to carve time out of the day if you don’t have common planning.” Especially if schools are expecting teachers to become more and more lockstep with teach other. Sophia stated, “There’s not enough time for [collaboration] especially if the intent of the collaboration is for you to [have] the same way, the same page, same book, same day philosophy that some favor.” Emma liked the idea of a common planning period, but she also thinks that additional time could be set aside during the school day for collaboration. Emma stated, “There’s so much opportunity to build times for collaboration into a schedule that would allow it to be a little more autonomous and give people a little bit more agency to do it. I love the idea of not just having a planning, but maybe having a time for collaboration where you could collaborate.” All the teachers agreed that some sort of additional common planning time would be beneficial for collaboration.

The existing literature shows that for PLCs to be effective there has to be certain level of congeniality among coworkers. For congeniality to take place more easily, trust

is a necessary ingredient in a school. If teachers do not trust each other or their principal, they become self-protective and are more likely to disengage from collaborative efforts (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). “Relational trust is organized around relationships between teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, and teachers with parents and with their school principal. Each person in these relationships maintains an understanding of his or her obligations and has expectations about the obligations of others” (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2001, p. 83). Aiden talks about how it was hard to tell at times who was in charge of the professional learning communities. He says, “I was looking to my department chair for instruction, and then suddenly I’m being given instruction from someone else, and technically that someone else is giving instructions to my department chair. Who’s running this show?” Aiden’s expectations for the department chair were not being met, and his confidence in the PLC quickly diminished as a result.

### *Professional Autonomy*

Studies have shown that as schools attempt to have large groups of people working toward a common goal, they run the risk of overemphasizing formalization, centralization, and standardization, creating a highly rigid structure that takes away the professionalism of teachers (Tschannen, 2009). When school leaders implement policies and regulations that result in the over-standardization of work processes, this can result in reductions in worker satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and creativity (Cloe & Goldsmith, 2002). “Job dissatisfaction leads to stress and ultimately to burnout if allowed to continue unabated” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 39). Inversely, in situations when general teacher autonomy increased so did professionalism and empowerment (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Existing literature shows that a large risk when implementing professional learning communities is taking control away from teachers. Teachers are looking for “guidance and support, but they do not want to be told exactly what to do” (Carl, 2014, p. 42). If teachers feel their agency threatened, they no longer feel like they are being treated like professionals, but instead “pawns who must be controlled” (Coggins, 2013, p. 44). If teachers are going to stay committed to the profession, there is a need to give educators “control over their work environment and to have personal on-the-job decision making authority” (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 47). In her interview, Olivia talked about her need for autonomy in her classroom. She stated, “I do not believe that all teachers should be expected to teach identically, or in a lock-step manner. In return, teachers should be given the freedom to choose how or whether they would like to use the resources and ideas that their colleagues share with them.” When teachers have more autonomy, the passion for their subject often increases.

Research has shown that what often separates good educators from great teachers is a passion for teaching. This enthusiasm is passed from teacher to students and helps to make learning more enjoyable and more effective. Zhang’s study found that teacher enthusiasm “is an effective predictor of student behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, intrinsic goal orientation, and academic self-efficacy” (Zhang, 2013, p. 52). Frenzel’s study had similar findings, noting that “empirical evidence supports the notion that teacher enthusiasm in turn is positively related to both students’ motivation and their evaluative reaction to school classes” (Frenzel, Goetz, Ludtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009, p. 706). In her interview, Riley touched on the importance of teacher enthusiasm. Riley explained, “I don’t think you need to be teaching the same novel to be teaching the same

skills ... I think assessments should be sort of like skills based, and not so much, because English is like a recursive skill. You're going back and doing these same skills over and over again." She went on to say, "I don't think that we should have to teach the same novels, because teachers are passionate about certain books."

Even if an educator came into the academic field with a passion for teaching, this passion could wane if the educator loses autonomy and is forced to teach content that he or she is not as interested in. "A passion for teaching, in general, is not nearly as powerful as when it is combined with a passion for the subject matter" (Breault, 2013, p. 7). One of the risks of mandated collaboration is taking away content choice from educators. This is especially significant with English teachers who have historically had some level of control in their classroom when it came to the literary texts that they wanted to use. Ava felt that teachers could address the state English standards by using different novels. She said, "I think you can teach totally different books. I liked it when you can teach totally different books but you're teaching the standards ... The standards we're teaching, whatever it is the district wants us to do, whatever standards in writing, in reading, in critical thinking or whatever, we can do that with five different books." Ava explains how students "can write an argumentative paper about *To Kill a Mockingbird* or [they] can do an argumentative paper about *Invisible Man* or about *The Color Purple*." Ava talked about how teachers are expected to respect students' individuality and uniqueness, and she felt that the same thinking should be applied to teachers.

Research findings have shown that greater autonomy along with administrative support have been found to correlate with lower levels of teacher migration (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). Increases in harmonious passion, passion about an activity

that one freely chooses, were shown to predict increases in job satisfaction and decreases in burnout symptoms over time (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008). The findings of Frenzel's study indicated that teacher enjoyment and student enjoyment are closely linked and that "emotionally "emotionally positive classrooms are likely successful classrooms. Emotionally positive classrooms enable teachers to best fulfill their teaching responsibilities and to maintain their emotional well-being" (Frenzel et al., 2009, p. 712).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Most of the existing literature I found either focused on the advantages of collaboration or discussed the importance of teacher autonomy. My study supports the existing literature by presenting individuals who struggle to teach effectively given the paradoxical nature of the interplay of these two ideas. Much of the prior research I found looked at elementary or middle school teachers and was not subject-specific. My study expands on the existing literature by looking at people teaching a specific grade level (high school) and subject (English).

My study helps to convey the challenges and benefits of professional learning communities in an attempt to make teacher collaboration more effective. A successful balance must be found between encouraging teacher collaboration while providing teacher autonomy. If teacher collaboration is not taking place, this could be detrimental to the learning of students; but if teacher collaboration is strictly mandated, some teachers will feel their autonomy threatened and their professionalism questioned, and this could result in teacher burnout and subsequent turnover. Although my study supported the existing literature on the benefits of collaboration, challenges of collaboration, and

characteristics of professional learning communities; my study did not contribute any additional information regarding how the student and teacher demographic makeup of a school affects teacher collaboration.

For future research, it would be interesting to further investigate how teacher and student demographics affect teacher collaboration. Studies have shown that gender can play a role in collaboration: schools with more female teachers were found to have better quality collaboration (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). My research did not reflect this, but my sample size was small. Looking at a larger sample of high school teachers could help researchers figure out if gender affects teacher collaboration. In past studies, race has also been shown to have an impact on whether or not teacher collaboration is effective. White teachers have generally reported lower levels of collaboration versus Hispanic or Black teachers (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Having only one African American teacher taking part in my study did not allow me to substantiate or disprove the assertion that race plays a role in teacher collaboration, but a study with a larger sample size would help add to the current body of work on this subject.

Existing literature indicates that the educational background of teachers can also have an influence on how well teachers work in collaborative teams. The higher level of education a teacher had, the less likely they were to be able to collaborate effectively. Another important factor that cannot be ignored, when trying to successfully create teacher collaboration and implement programs such as professional learning communities, is the school climate. Research shows that the schools where teachers really embraced PLCs were the places where positive relationships and practices were already in place; they were schools that already had a positive atmosphere, teacher



congeniality, and a high level of trust established between teachers and coworkers, and teachers and administrators (Datnow, 2011). Additional research, with a larger sample size, could be conducted to investigate to what extent educational background and school climate affect teacher collaboration.

The last area where I would encourage future research is on the subjects of collectivism and power distance. Collectivism has been defined by Hofstede (2001) as the prioritization of group interests over self-interest, as opposed to individualism, which refers to the prioritization of self-interest over group interest. Professional learning communities require a collectivistic view of the self as an important part of the larger professional network of teachers (Ning et al., 2015). Research shows a correlation between collectivism and team congeniality. While collectivism can increase congeniality, power differentials can have a negative effect. Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 2001, p. 98). Past organizational research studies have found that high power distance individuals tend to be more comfortable working in teams with strong leadership and top-down decision-making, but low power distance individuals tend to prefer working in autonomous and self-directed teams where every member is treated as equal and decision-making is more collegial (Earley and Erez 1997; Kirkman and Shapiro 1997; Liu, Wang, Hui, & Lee, 2012). Future research could be done on this subject with participants taking surveys that would indicate how levels of collectivism and power differentials correlate with teacher collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

The push by school districts to implement mandatory collaboration is a result of an increased level of teacher and school accountability in the public school system and the positive correlation found between teacher collaboration and student achievement. Many students across the country are not having their academic needs met, and some of these students will not complete high school. South Carolina has among the lowest high school graduation rates in the country. Studies have shown that collaboration improves student academic performance, so many administrators are requiring teachers to work together to address the needs of struggling students and improve student academic success.

One of the main ways that teacher collaboration is being enforced is through professional learning communities. In PLCs, teachers work together to create common curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments. In the past, collaboration between teachers was up to the teacher; now in many school districts teacher collaboration is becoming mandatory. Although there is a lot of evidence that collaboration is beneficial to students; risks and challenges do present themselves, especially when collaboration is mandated by a school.

After looking at existing literature on teacher collaboration and conducting interviews with ten English teachers on the subject, my findings indicate that teacher collaboration is important, but not at the expense of teacher autonomy. Teacher collaboration can result in the exchange of ideas and resources, which can result in improved curriculum and instruction. This is particularly important for teachers entering the profession or going to a new school. Collaboration can also help deter parent

complaints and can promote the professional growth of the teachers. If collaboration becomes strictly mandated though, it can take away from teacher autonomy, which can have negative consequences for both students and teachers.

One of the main conclusions drawn from the interviews conducted in this study, along with existing research on the subject, was that for teachers to be better able to address the needs of diverse students, they need to be able to adjust instruction when necessary. The ability for teachers to adjust instruction to best meet the needs of their students is directly connected to their autonomy and the extent to which they can deviate from the curriculum when necessary. One of the main slogans that I have heard throughout my teaching career is to “monitor and adjust,” and this idea was reiterated by the teachers I interviewed. Teachers must have the freedom to make changes to their curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments as they are going through their school year and gauging the specific needs of whichever group of students they are currently teaching.

The interviews I conducted during my research, along with previous studies, also have shown that mandatory collaboration poses a potential threat to teacher autonomy and teacher professionalism, and this can result in teacher turnover. When teachers lose autonomy and a sense of being treated like a professional, job satisfaction decreases. If worker satisfaction decreases among teacher, teacher turnover is more likely. One of the main concerns in public education is that of keeping the most capable, intelligent, and creative teachers in the field. A teaching career used to last thirty years for an individual, but now the average teaching career is around eleven years. Many of today’s new teachers do not stay in the profession long, and this is expensive for school systems and negatively affects student achievement. Increased teacher turnover creates a teacher

shortage, and schools are filling these positions with less effective teachers who are unable to meet the academic needs of their students.

When conducting my interviews, participants discussed how administrators can create more teacher energy and enthusiasm by creating organizational conditions that allow teachers to use their professional judgment to respond to the needs of their students. For example, instead of administrators having full control over professional learning communities, a few of the participants talked about the importance of teachers in PLCs being able to set their own schedules in accordance to their own their goals. My findings support the idea that teachers should be receptive to sharing but have permission to use or not use what they choose, depending on the particular needs of their students and their personal style of teaching. If schools do not empower teachers to make decisions, teachers will most likely disengage from the collaboration process.

If professional learning communities are managed too strictly, administrators run the risk of treating their teachers less like professionals and more like parts in larger machine. In schools that are more bureaucratic with principals who have authoritarian leadership styles, teachers do not have the same feeling of professionalism. When teachers have greater levels of professionalism, they are more engaged in the teaching process, worked cooperatively with one another, and are more enthusiastic about their work. Instead of administrators controlling all aspects of the professional learning communities, teachers need to take an active role in collaboration and other aspects of the school community. Teachers should be leaders when it comes to curriculum, instruction, and professional development at schools.

When I was finishing up my last interview (via email) with Olivia, her concluding words reverberated with me and provide a clear summary of my view of teacher collaboration after my study reached completion. Olivia stated,

I do not believe that all teachers should be expected to teach identically, or in a lock-step manner. In return, teachers should be given the freedom to choose how or whether they would like to use the resources and ideas that their colleagues share with them. In other words, teacher collaboration should not be presented as an unavoidable chore or a forced marriage of sorts, but as an opportunity to improve our practices “with a little help from [our] friends” (Lennon and McCartney).

The need for teachers to have autonomy is something that I could relate to directly, autonomy having been one of my own main motivators for entering, and staying in, the teaching profession. I loved being in a field that allowed me to use my creativity and express my individuality without the strict confines and limitations that might be found in other professions. It is not that I saw a problem with administrators conducting observations and providing feedback for teachers; quite the opposite – I felt this was a valuable tool for the professional growth of teachers. But, the ability to create my own curriculum, teach books that I loved, and freely and independently hone my craft was such a wonderful part of my career and a large reason for me staying in the education field.

My study, along with the existing literature on teacher collaboration, suggests that the current changes being made to schools like Jackson High School threaten the autonomy of teachers, might sometimes lead to making teaching less effective, and could

create a higher degree of teacher turnover. In a profession already struggling to keep competent teachers, I think one possible incentive to keep strong teachers would be that teachers who are successful in the classroom could be rewarded with a larger level of autonomy. This seems to make sense in a field where monetary gains are limited. If state governments cannot pay teachers more, they could instead offer them more freedom in exchange for their years of dedication and service to America's youth.

This is not to say collaboration should not be encouraged and common planning time provided to teachers who are interested in collaboration – I think these things should happen. Collaboration is so important, especially to new teachers or teachers who are struggling with their classes. When I was a new teacher, I was able to gain so much from veteran teachers: ideas concerning curriculum, novels, lessons, and assessments. But, I was also given the choice to use or disregard the information I was given. I was allowed to choose which ideas to incorporate in my classroom; mixing my own ideas with the ideas of others to create a personal curriculum that was both unique and shared.

When I look at teachers who are new to the profession having little input on their curriculum and instruction, I feel frustration for them. Yes, maybe they will never have to face some of the same challenges and setbacks involved with creating one's own curriculum, but they will also never experience the intellectual satisfaction of creating something new and different and personal. In life, so much of people's identities are connected to what they create and the pieces of themselves that they put into their work. Teachers should not have to sacrifice their own professional and personal fulfillment for the perceived good of the whole. My experience in the classroom, the research I have conducted, and existing literature I have found all suggest the opposite: collaboration and

autonomy can go hand in hand, benefitting teachers and students alike, to create a more positive and effective learning environment in our public schools.

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## APPENDIX A: Informed Consent for Participation in Research Project

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Jesse Barrett. I am an English teacher at AC Flora High School, and in partial completion of fulfilling requirements for my Pd. D. in Teaching and Learning through the University of South Carolina, I am conducting a research study on teacher collaboration. The study will examine teacher experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges and benefits of teacher collaboration and the characteristics of effective professional learning communities.

Your participation in this study will provide useful information on this topic. The information obtained from the study will be used to add to the professional knowledge base needed to implement effective teacher collaboration. You qualify for participation since you are an English teacher at AC Flora who has actively taken part in professional learning communities. You will be asked to attend an open-ended interview session with me that may take up to 90 minutes. At this interview, I will audio tape record the session and transcribe it.

Please note that participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may withdraw from participation in the study at any time. All data from this study are confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Data from the interviews and observations will remain anonymous. No identifying characteristics such as individual names will be used.

Although there are no foreseeable risks to participants, any questions posed during the interview unanswerable by the participants for any reason will be omitted. You may also decline from participation.

Thank you for your assistance.

Jesse L. Barrett  
English Teacher, AC Flora High School

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\_\_\_\_\_ I have read the contents of this informed consent letter and have been encouraged to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read the contents of this informed consent letter and have been encouraged to ask questions. I do not give my consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date