Promoting a Culture of Collaboration and Reflection through a Professional Learning Community

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PROMOTING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION AND REFLECTION THROUGH A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

by

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DEDICATION

My great-grandmother in heaven, Mrs. Georgeanna Heyward, I dedicate my dissertation work to you. You always stressed the significance of an education and doing well in school. Until you died at the age of 100 years old on June 30, 2009, your words to me have always been “My child, don’t let me down! Do your best in school, because an education is important…PLEASE don’t let granny down!” It is my prayer that my commitment to education and serving others as an educational leader has made you proud.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am grateful to God for being everything to me. I realize that, without Him, I would not be where I am today.

To my husband, Michael Murdaugh, who started this journey toward my completion of this doctoral program as my boyfriend, then became my fiancé, and ultimately became my husband, thank you for being my best friend, supporter, and shoulder to lean on through moments of frustration and anxiety throughout this journey. Thank you for the joy that you bring to my life. I am grateful that I get to spend the rest of my life with you.

I am thankful for my wonderful parents, Mr. Edmund Harrison and Ms. Charlene Russell, who helped me to realize the value of an education at an early age. Thank you for always being there for me and for being my biggest supporters and cheerleaders. Thank you for always being selfless parents and for putting my needs and wants before your own. I am grateful for everything you have done for me and continue to do for me and I promise never to let you down.

To my grandmother, Bernice Harrison, and aunt, Edwina Mungin, I love you ladies so much! Thank you, granny, for always having my back and being there for me whenever I needed you, no matter how big or small. Aunty Wina, thank you for being my second mother. Thank you for your love, kindness, and support throughout the years.
Finally, a special thanks to the faculty and staff of USC-Columbia, for helping me throughout this journey- Dr. Schramm, Dr. Lussier, Dr. Cook, Dr. Jeffries, and Dr. Solomon.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative Action Research Study was to describe eight elementary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers’ perceptions of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). The teacher-participants’ opinions about the PLC were used to improve the existing PLC to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers could be supportive of each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity at Next Generation Elementary School (NGES). Data collection strategies included semi-structured interviews conducted with the eight teacher-participants as well as a focus group with the eight teacher-participants to debrief the data collected from the individual interviews. The interview data was coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the participant-researcher and shared with the teacher-participants who reflected on the data in a follow-up focus group to develop an Action Plan that is cyclical and iterative. Findings from the interviews and focus group indicated that the teacher-participants did not perceive their current PLC as meaningful and concluded that they needed a PLC that promoted a culture of collaboration and reflection, in a trusting environment, as they engaged in dialogue regarding student data to promote student growth in the area of ELA.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind</td>
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<td>NGES</td>
<td>Next Generation Elementary School</td>
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<td>PASS</td>
<td>Palmetto Assessment of State Standards</td>
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<td>PLC</td>
<td>Professional Learning Community</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDIZED TESTING

Chapter One describes the identified problem of practice and the research question for the present Action Research study. The study involves a Professional Learning Community (PLC) designed to support teachers of English Language Arts (ELA) to improve student achievement at Next Generation Elementary School (NGES), a small rural school in South Carolina. The success of the students at NGES, in literacy, is critical as a recent study, as discussed by Sparks (2011) revealed that students who were unable to read in third-grade were four times less likely to graduate when compared to students who could read proficiently. NGES’s most recent SC state standardized assessment in the area of ELA, the 2015 ACT Aspire, revealed results similar to those of previous end-of-year state standardized assessments. The students of NGES were not able to exhibit mastery of their grade-level ELA standards. Students at NGES took the ACT Aspire assessment, along with other students across the state of SC, for the first time in 2015- the former state standardized assessment was the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS).

Background of the Problem of Practice

The 2015 ACT Aspire data revealed that NGES performed better than South Carolina schools statewide, in English, with an average of 71.2% of its students scoring “Exceeding and Ready” versus the state’s average of 67.9% students scoring “Exceeding and Ready.” Additionally, in English, 64.4% of the third-grade students scored
“Exceeding and Ready,” 78.6% of the fourth-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready,” and 71.1% of the fifth-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready” (South Carolina Department of Education).

In Reading, the 2015 ACT Aspire data revealed that NGES performed more poorly than schools statewide. 30.7% of NGES students scored “Exceeding and Ready” versus the state’s 37.2% “Exceeding and Ready.” Additionally, in Reading, 28.3% of the third-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready,” 33.3% of the fourth-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready,” and 30.8% of the fifth-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready” (South Carolina Department of Education). In Writing, the 2015 ACT Aspire data revealed that NGES performed more poorly than schools statewide. 18.6% of NGES students scored “Exceeding and Ready” versus the state’s 24.4% “Exceeding and Ready.” Additionally, in Writing, 7.3% of the third-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready,” 14.6% of the fourth-grade students scored “Exceeding and Ready,” and 30.8% of the students scored “Exceeding and Ready” (South Carolina Department of Education).

The inadequate literacy achievement among the students of NGES alarmed both administrators and teachers at the school. They were all aware that early literacy development is vital to the success of students in school and in life. Children who could successfully obtain literacy skills in their primary grades were prepared to be successful in their later education. Consequently, children who struggled with acquiring literacy skills during their primary grades oftentimes lagged behind their peers academically in later grades and were less likely to be interested in pursuing post-secondary studies (Sparks, 2011).
Statement of the Problem of Practice

The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) is concerned with hearing the voices of eight teacher-participants to improve the existing PLC for the elementary ELA teachers at NGES. The present Action Research Study sought to examine eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of their current PLC to formulate a plan for an improved PLC that promoted a more reflective and collaborative environment. Input from the teachers regarding the structure of the present ELA PLC model was not solicited before implementation. Therefore, the primary aim of this Action Research Study was to reveal the voices of the eight elementary ELA teacher-participants regarding their conceptualization of and plan for fostering an improved PLC designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

Research Question

What are NGES elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of a PLC?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this Action Research study was to examine eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of the ELA PLC at NGES. The data collected via the semi-structured interviews with the eight teacher-participants regarding their perceptions of the current PLC was used to create an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC structure for the elementary ELA teachers of NGES. The goal of the Action Plan is to cultivate and sustain a professional learning environment where ELA teachers are provided opportunities to support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.
Summary of Action Research Methodology

The participant-researcher employed qualitative research methods to examine eight teacher-participants. The teacher-participants were the eight elementary ELA teachers of NGES. The study gauged these teachers’ perceptions of a PLC. The participant-researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, individually, with each of the eight teacher-participants, first, and then facilitated a follow-up focus group with the teacher-participants, one month after the individual interviews. Both the semi-structured interviews and focus group were held in the conference room of NGES. The interview data was coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the participant-researcher first. The participant-researcher then shared the results with the teacher-participants in the follow-up focus group, where they reflected on the findings as a group. The participant-researcher, along with the teacher-participants, utilized the data collected to begin creating an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES, to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment that would enable them to interrogate their ELA practices as mentioned above. A more in-depth review of the Action Research Methodologies employed in this study can be found in Chapter Three of this Action Research Study.

Theoretical Conceptualization

The present study is grounded in the Reflective Practice Theory, developed by Donald Schön (1983). According to Osterman (1990), Schön believed that “skilled practitioners are reflective practitioners; they utilize their experience as a basis for assessing and revising existing theories of action to develop more effective action strategies” (as cited in Osterman, p. 133). Osterman suggests that “reflective practice,
however, is far more than leisurely speculation on one’s own successes and failures” (p. 134). Instead “reflective practice is a challenging, focused, and critical assessment of one’s own behavior as a means towards developing one’s own craft” (p. 134). Furthermore, she contends that, “[r]eflective practice is a professional development method which enables individual practitioners to become more skillful and more effective” (p. 134). The individual success of the students means the collective success of the school and its school system.

Reflective practice improves professional growth and development by promoting dialogue among practitioners and helping the overall health of our educational organizations. Because practitioners are communicating more often, they “establish[es] a basis for understanding, caring, and cooperation in the workplace” (Osterman, p. 139). Such meaningful communication and collaboration results in, according to Belenky, et al. (1986), an acceptance of others’ ideas. Ultimately, Belenky, et al. argues that through reflective practice and communication, “the ideas of other become less strange and the search for new and better ways of achieving professional goals becomes a public and collaborative process, rather than an isolated and individual effort” (p. 115). Teachers must “question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then be ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 1). This “critical questioning” is essential to help students’ scholarly activity as it helps with teachers’ workplace relationships and their relationship to the administrators at varying levels.
**Historical Contextualization**

Hord (2008) believes that the history of education is reflective of teachers working in isolation, or as she states, “teachers worked in what were architecturally characterized as egg crate schools” (p. 10). Thus, teachers usually worked in their classrooms with little to no communication with other adults. Teachers were confined to “cell-like classrooms” which “promoted insulation and isolation from other staff,” (p. 10). In the past, Hord suggests teachers were given the power to teach in a way that was reflective of whatever knowledge they had regarding curriculum and instruction, working independently of one another. Such an organization of schools and classrooms prevented “meaningful interaction” between teachers (p. 10).

However, Hord (2008) suggests a potential for change. Beginning in the 1980s, schools embraced the idea of team-teaching. Consequently, educators became engaged in dialogue about teachers’ workplaces and the implications for teacher morale, knowledge, and skills. Hence, we see a transition from working in isolation to interactions among teachers that led to the notion of teachers working together to share their work. In addition to teachers being provided with different ideas for teaching, team teaching increased both teacher morale and motivation.

As a result, many schools and districts began to schedule grade-level and department meetings for elementary and secondary teachers, “though no one paid much attention to what teachers were doing when they met” (Hord, 2008, p. 11). Such new arrangements to the structure of teaching practices allowed time for teachers to meet and focus their attention on varying administrative tasks or to discuss varying professional development opportunities. Districts began to recognize the value of teachers working
together and collaborating, as they met to discuss their failures and successes with their colleagues (Hord, 2008). Here we find the beginning of Professional Learning Communities as we know them today.

During this transition in educational history, we see the introduction of standards. The standards aimed to “identify[ing] what students were expected to achieve” and “what educators were responsible to teach” (Hord, 2008, p. 11). Hord (2008) contends that it was during this time that teachers and administrators realized that old teaching practices could not prevail. Teachers needed opportunities for “intentional learning, preparing them to enable students to reach high standards” (p. 12). Thus, the PLC signified that the professionals of a school were assembling together as a group or community, for the sole purpose of learning in these new structures. Hord suggests that the following became the question that the PLCs focused on: What should we intentionally learn to become more effective in our teaching so that students learn well?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is guided by the research findings of Shirley Hord (1997), in collaboration with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). Hord is known for her extensive studies on Professional Learning Communities; however, in her research with the SEDL, their focus was on “understand[ing] the phenomenon of producing change-ready schools (those that value change and seek changes that will improve their schools)” (Hord, 1997, p. 4). Hord, along with the Members of the SEDL organization, studied a school in the SEDL region which exemplified numerous qualities of a PLC. For four years, they studied the PLC to determine the attributes that contributed to its success as a PLC and a “change-ready
school.” Hord (1997) found the following attributes in the success of the PLC in the school she studied: “supportive and shared leadership”, “shared values and vision”, “collective creativity”, “supportive conditions”, and “shared personal practice” (p. 14).

**Summary of Findings**

The research findings of this Action Research Study were divided into the following three major themes: defining the PLC, identifying a purpose, and developing supportive conditions. These findings were revealed because of the participant-researcher investigating the relationship between how the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC and how the teacher-participants perceived their current PLC. Determining how the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC and how they perceived their current PLC was significant to the participant-researcher, because this would enable her to determine the value that the teacher-participants found in the current PLC.

The research findings indicated that the teacher-participants did not perceive the current PLC to be meaningful, nor did they find that the current PLC supported their needs or the needs of their students. Because the needs of the teacher-participants were not assessed prior to the implementation of the current PLC, the participant-researcher worked alongside the teacher-participants, utilizing the specific research findings, to create an Action Plan for an improved ELA PLC. This study is significant because it provided these ELA teachers and school administrators with a framework for evaluating and improving their current ELA PLC as a means of promoting a more reflective and collaborative environment to support ELA teachers in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.
Dissertation Overview

Chapter One presented the background for this Action Research Study. Chapter One specified the Statement of the Problem of Practice (PoP), Purpose of the Study, and the Summary of Action Research Methodology. Chapter One concluded by providing an overview of the research findings. A review of the related literature will be presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Two also includes an overview of the Purpose of the Literature Review and concludes by identifying and defining Key Terms, as related to this Action Research Study. Chapter Three presents an overview of the Action Research Methodologies which summarizes a Plan for Data Collection and Analysis, a Plan for Reflecting with Participants on the Data, and a Plan for Devising an Action Plan. The results of the investigation outlined in Chapter Three will be presented in Chapter Four. A Discussion of Major Points and an Action Plan will be provided in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY SCHOLARSHIP

This Action Research Study sought to provide the eight ELA teachers of NGES a way to express their perceptions of a PLC. The following review of related literature provides a definition of PLCs, an explanation of how to create one, and insight on how to maintain it. The review of related literature was significant to the study because it provided the participant-researcher and teacher-participants with insight into the effects of PLCs on students’ scholarly activity in ELA.

Statement of the Problem of Practice

The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) is concerned with hearing the voices of eight teacher-participants to improve the existing PLC for the elementary ELA teachers at NGES. The present Action Research Study sought to examine eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of their current PLC to formulate a plan for an improved PLC that promoted a more reflective and collaborative environment. Input from the teachers regarding the structure of the present ELA PLC model was not solicited before implementation. Therefore, the primary aim of this Action Research Study was to reveal the voices of the eight elementary ELA teacher-participants regarding their conceptualization of and plan for fostering an improved PLC designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.


**Research Question**

What are NGES’s elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of a PLC?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this Action Research study was to examine eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of the ELA PLC at NGES. The data collected via the semi-structured interviews with the eight teacher-participants regarding their perceptions of the current PLC was used to create an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC structure for the elementary ELA teachers of NGES. The goal of the Action Plan is to cultivate and sustain a professional learning environment where ELA teachers are provided opportunities to support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

**Purpose of Literature Review**

The following review of related literature review was intended to examine several elements of PLCs. The review will define the professional learning communities and its guiding ideas. It will also explain the process for creating a PLC and its governing rules. From there, the review will discuss the purpose of PLCs and their effects. Finally, the review outlines ways to sustain PLCs and eliminate barriers to their efficacy.

**Defining Professional Learning Communities**

Servage (2008) suggests that a PLC should center upon collaborative work that encourages inquiry and problem solving. These two things relate to the lived experiences of teaching in the classroom. In Servage's view, PL Cs are necessarily collaborative in that they require collegiality. Administrators must consider PL Cs vital to improving student
learning to foster a space for professional development. The importance of the space for professional development, according to McLaughlin & Talbert (2006), is that teachers would be able to evaluate their practice, weighing it against student performance, and adjusting based on their reflections for their students’ betterment (p. 4). There are multiple definitions for Professional Learning Community. Hord (2009), states that a PLC is defined by the words that are explicitly stated. The first, professional, in which group members are responsible and accountable both as part of the group and individuals. The second, learning, which is the active verb in which professionals take part both for their students (in this case) and for themselves. The last, community, pulls the professionals together to learn intensely about a topic and develop shared meaning. However, for the purposes of this study, a PLC will be defined as, “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002).

**The Big Ideas**

In thinking about the efficacy of PLCs, DuFour (2004b) suggests the term had been used so universally that it is in jeopardy of losing all intended meaning. Rather than referring to a specific kind group collaboration, it refers to any group at all, from school on up to national governance. He argues that educators must critically contemplate the concept’s merits by asking what are the core principles of PLCs. DuFour suggests that the following are three essential principles that govern effectively operating PLCs. The first, ensure students learn. The second, a culture of collaboration. The third, focus on results.
Ensuring that students learn is a mission in which teachers vow to guarantee the success of all students rather than as a politically correct hyperbole. DuFour (2004) suggests that the PLC model springs from the notion that the central mission of formal education is not simply to guarantee that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. When such phenomena occur, the school staff begins to: examine school characteristics that have been most effective in helping students achieve at high levels; contemplate how to embrace such characteristics within their own unique environment; explore the commitments that would have to be made to create such a school; and identify indicators for progress monitoring. DuFour proposes that, “when the staff has built shared knowledge…the school has a solid foundation for moving forward with its improvement initiative” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6).

As the school moves forward, each professional in the building must engage with colleagues in the constant investigation of three vital questions that motivate the work of those within a PLC. According to DuFour, what “separates learning communities from traditional schools” is the response to students who have difficulty learning (p. 7). When schools function as learning communities the staff tackles such incongruities by introducing practices that all teachers can follow, standardizing the extra help students need. In addition to being systematic and school-wide, the professional learning community’s response to students who have trouble is prompt, it intervenes rather than remedies, and it directs the students toward mastery. In other words, it does not let students flounder and takes a vested interest in guiding them to successful learning habits. Rather than “subjecting struggling students to a haphazard education lottery,” we must give every student a solid foundation (Dufour, 2004b, p. 7).
To give students the support they require, educators must recognize that it is imperative to work together to accomplish their collective purpose of learning for all. Consequently, they strive to create systems to promote a collaborative culture, which can include a PLC. Even in schools that sanction the idea of collaboration, the staff’s willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door and teachers continue to labor in isolation. DuFour (2004b) suggests that staff members at different schools have different connotations for the term collaboration. Some school staffs associate the term collaboration with friendliness and an emphasis on building group solidarity, while other staffs join forces to develop consensus on operational procedures. DuFour argues that, though consensus and friendliness are good, they are largely inadequate.

In PLCs teachers work in teams, engaging in a continuous cycle of questions that encourage deep team learning. Such a process, in turn, yields higher levels of student achievement. Collaborative conversations require team members to make public what has traditionally been private: goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions provide every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the individual and collective classroom practice of teachers.

While schools must be results driven, it is unfortunately the case that our systems are not effectively gauging results. This is “DRIP” or the “Data Rich/Information Poor” condition (DuFour, 2004b, p. 9). For teacher teams to participate in continuous categorization of student achievement, improving on that level, and achieving goals, the teams must understand what to do with the data. PLCs not only welcome data but they turn it into relevant information. So, while, as DuFour argues, a teacher can establish
class statistics, such as averages and deviation, it is only useful when, as teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students and individual teachers can call on their team colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. Such a practice is beneficial because each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team.

**Establishing Professional Learning Communities**

Lunenburg (2010) contends that the role of the principal is important to the establishment of a school as a PLC. He believes that the principal commences the process by gathering his or her staff together to engage in the following four step process. The first step is to create a mission statement which requires the staff to reflect on the ideologies that shape their fundamental purpose. The principal's role here is to probe their teachers with questions to make them reflect on hard questions: what to do in the face of difficulty or what we need to change to help students. Lunenburg (2010) proposes that once the school’s mission has been established, the next step is to create a vision, through consensus mediated by the principal, that reflects the school that the faculty members want to create. Though the principal serves as an esteemed contributor in the development of a vision, the vision is personified by the process rather than by the individuals. Principals should encourage their faculty to periodically revisit their vision to consider its continued relevance.

At this point, the faculty must work to recognize their shared values, the values that inform their vision. Shared values are representative of the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that each teacher vows to exhibit to move the school closer to their shared
vision. Other school stakeholders (the board of education, support staff, administrative team, students, parents, and community members) also participate in the dialogue regarding the behaviors, attitudes, and commitments the school needs from them to advance the vision. Principals can assist their faculty in identifying goals that transform teaching and learning, with an emphasis on the latter. In using the first three steps to inform the goals that they make, the faculty should organize activities to monitor progress. By articulating goals, the school will “foster commitment” while “providing performance standards” that ultimately “enhanc[e] motivation” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 3).

**Professional Learning Community Guidelines**

Pritle & Tobia (2014) suggest that several districts and schools assemble in various types of gatherings that they commonly refer to as PLCs. However, they argue that, for PLCs to work and be useful, “district and school leaders must focus on increasing teachers’ collaborative professional learning and self-reflection to improve classroom instruction for enhanced student gains” (p.2). PLCs have six guidelines that foster efficacy: providing a clear structure and purpose for PLC meetings; addressing the most pressing instructional challenges; providing support from all levels of the school system; fostering an atmosphere of trust; monitoring the work of PLCs and providing constructive feedback; and supporting teachers’ sense of efficacy and level of professionalism.

When participating in PLCs, teachers are encouraged to examine varying forms of assessments (formative, benchmark, and state assessment data) before their meetings (Pritle & Tobia, 2014). The information obtained, because of reviewing the data, should become the source for which PLC facilitators and members use to make certain that a
clear purpose is formulated for each meeting. Then, the group discusses priorities that can include standards and specific student achievement. Through the practice of utilizing authentic student products (as a part of the PLC model), teachers can collaborate about discrepancies in students’ performance. Therefore, the staff is provided an opportunity to collectively determine and identify what does and does not work to help their students reach standards, and, from there, adjust accordingly.

Teachers need support for PLCs to work effectively. Support can be as simple as providing blocks of time in which teachers can meet and collaborate, or offering different teacher trainings and professional development, or even ensuring technology both for the classroom and for teacher collaboration. In addition, teachers also need support from experts that can teach them how to analyze the data they are reviewing before each meeting, measure it against standards, and adjust instruction accordingly. Another form of support is simply that teachers need these spaces to reflect on their teaching and honestly engage one another about the difficulties of the profession (Pritle & Tobia, 2014). This requires trust between teachers and between teachers and administrators.

When school leaders foster conditions in which educators support one another’s practice in PLCs, teachers feel more secure and develop a strong sense of self-efficacy. This sense of confidence bears out in higher student achievement, which then, in turn, reinforces for teachers that PLCs are useful and valuable tools in the teaching trade. Pritle & Tobia (2014) suggest that instructional leaders can support teachers in linking PLC meetings to changes in instructional routines by regularly attending PLC meetings and conducting learning walkthroughs to observe how decisions made in PLC meetings are
implemented in the classroom. This engagement on the part of leaders will further encourage teachers to engage honestly in the space of the PLC.

**What Happens in Professional Learning Communities**

Hord (2009) suggests that the learning and community part of the PLC are the most important when it comes to collaboration. Members of the PLC study various sources of student data to determine where students are performing well; consequently, this allows staff members the opportunity for celebration. However, the areas in which students do not perform successfully obtain the staff’s most meticulous attention. Staff members seek to prioritize student learning needs and specify one area to which they give their attention immediately. Cooperatively, the staff assumes the responsibility to learn new content, strategies, or approaches, to become more effective in teaching to the identified problem areas. In a PLC, learning is not considered another task added to the responsibility of the professional; instead, it is considered a routine activity in which the group continuously learns how to learn together. The second aspect is the community of professional learners. Rather than just meaning a group of people in a social setting, the community part of PLCs requires that its members, “focus on a shared purpose, mutual regard and caring, and an insistence on integrity and truthfulness” (Hord, 2009, p. 40). Lambert (as cited by Hord, 2009) states that, “to evaluate our work in schools to the level required by a true community, we must direct our energies and attention toward something greater than ourselves” (p. 41).

**Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities**

To encourage these communities, Hord (as cited by Teague & Anfara, 2012) establishes five dimensions to the PLC. PLCs share values and vision, have supportive
leadership, encourage collective learning and application of that learning to practice, allow space for personal practice, and, finally, foster supportive conditions that encompass both relationships and structures. The dimensions themselves constitute a kind of shared vision. Developing a vision centered on student learning is the trademark of a true PLC. Therefore, a vision statement inflicted upon a group of teachers does not offer the motivation to move the group forward in achieving its goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 1990). Instead, they must come up with the vision themselves.

Shared values and vision influence the ways in which teachers work both individually and collectively toward mutual goals, encouraging innovation and risk taking. Schools must be fully dedicated to the PLC to help improve student achievement and to increase the efficacy of both the teachers and the administrators. Administrators in schools with effective PLCs fostered relationships within the school, which allowed for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Administrators possess the ability to enhance the capabilities of teachers and guide that capacity towards improving student learning. To accomplish this task, a principal must unambiguously articulate the expectations of teachers, “build capacity, and monitor and review the process (Teague & Anfara, 2012).

Hord (2009) describes the learning that occurs within PLCs as “a habitual activity [in which] the group learns how to learn together continually” (p. 40). Several researchers (Cohen & Hill, 2001; DuFour, 2004b) have found that cooperative learning and application to practice stimulates seeking answers to questions about what students need to learn, how we will know it has been learned, and how we will act when students struggle. For collective learning to occur, the competence for dialogue among the
members must be nurtured (Teague & Anfara, 2012). A PLC must operate as a self-governing environment that, “allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members” (Hord, 1997, p. 37). Consequently, Hord (1997) believes that when educators learn cooperatively, new skills and strategies develop as they start to question the existing state of affairs in search of best knowledge and practice.

According to Huffman & Hipp (2003) this dimension of a PLC necessitates respect and the development of trust. Conducting peer observations, communicating feedback, and coaching or mentoring are all vital parts of a PLC (Teague & Anfara, 2012). Shared practice allows teachers to take on the roles of mentor, mentee, coach, specialist, advisor, and facilitator by sharing parts of their practices that are hidden by the walls of the school: daily actions their colleagues don’t see. Which means, according to Sergiovanni (2000), connections and relationships are formed around teacher practices.

Huffman and Hipp (as cited by Teague & Anfara, 2012) believes that supportive conditions are the glue that is essential to holding the other dimensions of a PLC together. Supportive conditions refer to relational conditions (trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk taking and reflective dialogue) and structural conditions (time and space for collaboration). Teachers oftentimes conveyed that time and pressure to meet other job requirements were obstacles to PLC development; therefore, “proximity of people, consideration of the schedule, and common planning times were reported to be structural considerations that impacted the success of developing learning communities” (Teague & Anfara, 2012, p. 61).
Effects of Professional Learning Communities

Williams (2013) conducted a study to determine if the reading achievement of urban students would increase because of frequent collaborative teacher groups in a Texas school district. The district was large and urban (unlike the school in this study). The intent of the study was to explore the following two questions: What differences existed in the overall percentage passing in reading achievement data for elementary, middle, and high schools during district-wide implementation of PLCs? What were teachers’ perceptions of PLC activities and their impact?

The study was reflective of a causal-comparative research design and employed mixed methods. A mixture of intentional and stratified sampling was used in choosing the 76 participating schools and 35 teachers to serve as interviewees. This particular study was a part of a larger study, conducted within the school district; therefore, only 17 of the 35 teachers taught reading or language arts. Consequently, the researcher was able to choose participants whom taught at low-, medium- and high-performing schools for the investigation.

To examine teachers’ perceptions of PLCs and possible cause and effect relationships that may have accounted for differences in student achievement, the researchers used data collection instruments to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. For five years, the researchers used the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in addition to the ANOVA, which looked at passing scores from elementary through high school. They also taped interviews with teachers to consider the efficacy of PLCs. The findings of the study revealed that numerous statistically-supported improvements took place in student-achievement because of district-wide implementation of PLCs. Statistically significant
differences in elementary, middle, and high school students’ achievement on the TAKS, because of district-wide implementation of PLCs, over a period of three years, appeared in the ANOVA measurements. At the end of the study, a mean of .33% represented the percentage of elementary students passing reading, .75% for middle school students passing reading, and .67% for high school students passing reading.

According to the qualitative research findings, elementary, middle, and high school teachers believed that PLCs offered opportunities for them to learn and positively affected their classroom practices. Teachers’ responses from the focus group interviews revealed the following four broad themes. The teachers highly valued the collaborative nature of PLCs which brought them out of isolation. In addition, by focusing on the data, they could consider student achievement more intensely. As a PLC, they could brainstorm activities that helped with students’ needs. Finally, the school culture greatly improved as the teachers found their voice in questioning current practices and working to address them collectively. The researchers for this study contend that, “finding the right equation for improving any organization is a monumental task” (Williams, 2013, p. 39) and that “the results from this study provide strong support that collaboration through PLCs is an important piece of the equation for continuous improvement” (Williams, 2013, p. 39).

In another study, conducted at Westwood Elementary School, in Ankeny, Iowa, Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards (2009) “share collective reflections from two literacy specialists and one school administrator in one Midwestern U.S. elementary school” to assess the use of data in order to change instruction and increase student achievement (p. 334). Westwood Elementary School consists of approximately 638 students from
Kindergarten through fifth grade and has a total of 78 teachers and support staff. The demographic makeup of the students attending Westwood Elementary is as follows: “of the 638 students enrolled, 49% are female and 51% are male, 1.6% Asian, .8% Hispanic, .8% African American, 96.8% Caucasian, and the percentage of free and reduced-cost lunch rate is 7.8% compared with the district’s rate of 8.4%” (p. 334).

Student performance, as exhibited on the school’s annual performance report, reveal that, though the students’ reading scores have been above average, they have remained stagnant for many year. The school was placed on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) watch list because of the subgroup of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) experiencing significantly low reading achievement. Consequently, the school principal, Jim Ford, contended that, “it was evident that these students’ reading performance needs were not being met adequately and that some changes were in order” (Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards p. 334). Mr. Ford, for the 2006-2007 school year implemented a school wide professional development plan with the goal of “significantly increasing the reading performance of all students, paying special attention to students whose performance was two or more grade levels below expectations” (p. 334). The work of DuFour and Eaker (1998) provided Mr. Ford, and the school, with the necessary framework for ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and action that focused on improving reading instruction, teacher learning, and overall school performance.

Significant increases in student performance occurred in the two years following the establishment of Westwood Elementary School as a Professional Learning Community. A sampling of the data illustrating enhancements in students’ reading achievement showed that from 2008-2009, 96% of kindergarteners were reading at or
above grade level, first grade students improved on reading comprehension scores by 7%, second grade students improved on reading comprehension by 14%, and third grade students’ reading comprehension scores were up 7%, putting them in the same proficiency range as the kindergarteners (almost 100%) (Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards, 2009, p. 335). For the higher-grade levels, fourth grade students improved by 6%, from 89.6 to 95.1% while fifth grade students made an even bigger leap from 79.6 to 94.5%, putting them above the district average (Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards, 2009, p. 335).

These dramatic changes meant that Westwood was taken off the NCLB watch list. Principal Ford and his teachers agreed that the only way to address students’ learning needs was via the establishment of a culture of continuous school improvement. Principal Ford suggests that even though there is not a fail-safe way to implement changes, the three elements essential to success included hiring reading coaches to work toward reading goals; the PLC itself; and broad staff support for goals outlined by the principal (Mokhtari, Thoma, and Edwards p. 335). All three of these things contributed to the increase in student reading achievement, and are demonstrably helpful in thinking about the urgency of establishing PLCs.

**Sustaining Professional Learning Communities**

Hord (2009) suggests that there are two organizational structures of interest when systematizing the professional community’s work. The first structure is representative of meetings that occur once a month where the professionals meet as grade-level teams or as subject-matter teams. Members of such groups allocate their time together towards focusing on the needs of their students, their curriculum, and the varying instructional practices that could be utilized to meet the unique needs of their students. The second
learning structure for PLCs is monthly meetings with the entire staff to evaluate the school’s data, express goals, and to decide the learning experiences needed for them to achieve their goals. As a part of a larger community of learners, the professionals are responsible for sharing and discussing their team-group’s learning with the other community members. Hord believes that this organizational structure for professional learning offers “common purpose for the school” (Hord, 2009, 42). As articulated earlier, the principal will be a key figure in initiating these meetings and establishing the open culture required for teachers to participate in PLCs.

In addition to establishing that the meetings will happen and protecting the space in which teachers will meet, the principal must work to establish time in the day for such meetings. Ultimately, this would require changing the school schedule: lengthening four of the five days by twenty minutes to end early on the fifth day. This fifth day would provide the time necessary for teachers to collaborate and reflect. The principal is the go-between for parents and district managers, working out the logistics of this schedule change and standing with teachers in asking for this crucial time for educator learning. In addition to setting aside the time, the principal will also need to establish the space for these meetings. A good template would be for the meetings to take place in a different teachers’ room to showcase what different educators are doing, what different tactics they try, and what the different demands of the grade levels are.

Two of the final responsibilities of the principal are hiring a data professional and stepping aside. The first is to sustain the PLC by introducing someone that can break down data and data processes to make teachers’ job of analyzing and reflection easier and more enjoyable. Rather than looking at raw data and possibly drawing wrong
conclusions, a professional will boil down the necessary information for the educators. Once the teachers have established a routine and collaborative climate, it will be time for the principal to work “in democratic participation with the staff” rather than as a singular leader above them (Hord, 2009, p. 43).

**Eliminating Barriers to Success**

For collaborative cultures to thrive, several practices need to stop. DuFour (2004b) argues that schools must stop fantasizing that providing teachers with a copy of the state’s standards or district’s curriculum guide will ensure all students’ retrieval of a common curriculum. Oftentimes, school districts spend more time developing the intended curriculum than on implementing it (Marzano, 2003). Thus, schools must provide teachers with enough time to review and evaluate state and district curriculum documents, for their conversations to move beyond basic questions about what to teach but toward questions of how to measure the effects of that teaching. In addition, practitioners must stop making excuses for avoiding collaboration. Educators know that working in isolation is damaging but fall back on excuses (lack of time, training, etc.) to get out of the considerable amount of work that collaboration requires.

**Conclusion**

PLCs provide a structure that builds upon the Reflective Learning Theory to enable continued learning for professionals. Though the idea of PLCs has a foundation in multiple research efforts, data on teachers' perceptions of implementation and PLC structure continue to be lacking. As education continues to be subject to national, state, and local political agendas, teachers' ability to collaboratively learn and assess what practices work best for their students will remain a high priority for school improvement.
This research aims to provide educators with qualitative data regarding elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of PLCs, for consideration before implementation of PLCs within schools, to promote an environment of optimal reflection and collaboration with the intent of supporting teachers’ endeavors to improve their curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.
CHAPTER THREE

STUDYING TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Chapter Three describes the qualitative Action Research methods used to examine the ELA PLC at NGES. This study was designed to provide these elementary administrators and teachers with a framework for evaluating their existing PLC and to cultivate and sustain a new PLC designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment. The methods used in this Action Research study included data collection about NGES’s current professional learning environment. Data provided a process for NGES to critically reflect on its professional learning environment to create opportunities for improvement. Data analysis led to an Action Plan to be implemented in the fall of 2017 for an improved professional learning environment which offers more time for teachers to collaborate and to reflect on their ELA curriculum, pedagogy, and students’ scholarly activity.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with eight teacher-participants at NGES. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in NGES’s conference room. The interview data was coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the participant researcher, first, and then shared and reflected on with the teacher-participants in a follow-up focus group, which was held one month following the semi-structured interviews, in the conference room of NGES. The participant-researcher used
the data collected via the semi-structured interviews and focus group to begin creating an Action Plan alongside the teacher-participants. The plan was designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES and to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment that would enable them to interrogate their ELA practices.

**Statement of Problem of Practice**

The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) showcases the voices of eight teacher-participants to improve the existing PLC for the elementary ELA teachers at NGES. The present Action Research Study sought to examine eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of their current PLC to formulate a plan for an improved PLC that promoted a more reflective and collaborative environment. Input from the teachers regarding the structure of the present ELA PLC model was not solicited before implementation. Therefore, the primary aim of this Action Research Study was to reveal the voices of the eight elementary ELA teacher-participants regarding their conceptualization of and plan for fostering an improved PLC designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

**Research Question**

What are NGES elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of a PLC?

**Purpose of the Study**

This Action Research study examined eight elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of the ELA PLC at NGES. The data collected via the semi-structured interviews with the eight teacher-participants regarding their perceptions of the current PLC was used to create an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC structure
for the elementary ELA teachers of NGES. The goal of the Action Plan is to cultivate and sustain a professional learning environment where ELA teachers are provided opportunities to support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

The Setting

NGES has a student population comprised of 379 students from 4K- fifth grade (63% White, 27% African American, and 10% other ethnicity). At NGES, there are 16 classroom teachers, five teaching assistants, two learning specialists, a reading coach, a curriculum coach, a speech pathologist, a teacher for gifted and talented students, and four teachers from special area. Each teacher at the school is rated highly qualified. Additionally, NGES has one principal and one assistant principal. Eight of the teachers are the focus of the present Action Research Study. They were selected because they teach the elementary-grade (third through fifth) students and they each teach ELA in their self-contained classrooms, and where they are also responsible for teaching each of the other three “core subjects” (Math, Science, and Social Studies).

Ethical Consideration #1: Consent, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

According to Metler (2014), garnering permission from all stakeholders is one of the first steps. The participant-researcher drafted and distributed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) that provided the teacher-participants with an overview of the research study. The information contained within the informed consent form included:

1. Information about the participant-researcher and what the study was about.
2. An overview of the individual interview and focus group data collection process.
3. An explanation of how participation in the study was voluntary.
4. An explanation of confidentiality and anonymity.

5. A rationale of the benefits of participating in the study.

6. An explanation of the potential risks, or lack thereof, of participating in the study.

7. The participant-researchers’ contact information.

The participant-researcher ensured that the data was always secure. The data remained in a three-ring binder, in a locked file. The participant-researcher pre-assigned the teacher-participants a number (or code), and that number was what appeared at the top of the teacher-participants’ interview transcripts. The master coding list remained in the participant-researcher’s locked file, along with the data notebook, and tape recorder. The data collected will be destroyed approximately one year after the study.

Additionally, the participant-researcher adhered to Metler & Charles’ (2011) ethical principles. First, the study was in the pursuit of knowledge, conducted to better understand the functioning of PLCs. As stated above, the intent of this study was to benefit the teachers in their everyday teaching practices. It also seeks to provide administration with an example of the successful implementation of a PLC. The second ethical principle is honesty, which requires the researcher to be open with the participants and protect the integrity of the data. The participant-researcher provided an honest overview of the study to the teacher-participants within an informed consent form and again at the beginning of everyone, semi-structured interview. No data was manipulated or covered up. Finally, the ethical principal of importance which meant that the study had to be worth the participants’ time and effort. Oftentimes, the voices of teachers go unheard. Teachers represent a marginalized group of people who oftentimes are not
treated as professionals. Teachers, without their opinions, feelings, or expertise considered, are forced to follow mandates that have not been tested for efficacy (Metler, 2014, p.112).

**Ethical Consideration #2: Insider- Outsider Researcher**

The participant-researcher serves as the Assistant Principal at NGES. Occupying that position meant that the participant-researcher assumed the role of insider-outsider researcher during the Action Research Study. According to Naples (2003), “insider research has been identified as the study of one’s own social group or society” (p. 46) and outsider research occurs when the researcher is not a part of the group being studied. The participant-researcher was an insider researcher because she was a member of the ELA PLC at NGES, and served as an instructional leader; however, she was also an outsider, because she was not an ELA teacher and was not directly a part of the everyday, direct experiences, shared by the ELA teachers at NGES. The participant-researcher was serving in a capacity that separated her from the teachers. The participant-researcher was in a “positionality” that, according to Greene (2014), was “blurred.” (p. 2). Since “insiderness or outsiderness are not fixed or static positions,” the participant-researcher made use of both of her positions (Naples, 2003, p. 46). The participant-researcher assumed the role of outsider researcher during the “Planning and Acting” stages of the Action Research Study, and assumed the role of insider researching during the “Developing and Reflecting” stages of the Action Research Study.

**Ethical Consideration #3: Earning Teacher-Participants’ Trust**

As the Assistant Principal at NGES, the participant-researcher understood that it was critical to gain the trust of the elementary ELA teachers at the school. The
participant-researcher understood that in her role as an administrator at the school, the ELA teachers could potentially be hesitant in disclosing their sincere feelings regarding the PLC that was currently in place for them, at NGES. By occupying an outsider position, the participant-researcher was especially worried about receiving inauthentic responses because the teacher-participants were registering her as an assistant principal and not as a peer and a researcher. Because of this, the participant-researcher explained during the first meeting her interest in the study was a result of a genuine desire to “hear their voices,” and to work alongside them creating a PLC reflective of their beliefs and values. The participant-researcher assumed that she had gained the trust of the teacher-participants as they each agreed to be honest with her during the study.

**Ethical Consideration #4: Ensuring Credibility of Data**

The participant-researcher provided an opportunity for the teacher-participants to “member check” the research findings to ensure that the data was accurate. Member checking requires transparency on the part of the researcher, as it consists of sharing every component of the research process from analysis to transcripts to dissertation drafts (Metler, 2014). Not only does it make the teacher-participants feel included and valued, it makes sure the participant-researcher does not manipulate or misrepresent their words or the situation. The participant-researcher engaged the teacher-participants in the data analysis process, to ensure that their voices were captured accurately during the interview process. The participant-researcher enhanced the credibility of the research process by maintaining a detailed log of how the data was collected and analyzed. Consequently, the log included a precise account of the research methods employed within this Action Research Study, to ensure that the results could be replicated.
**Ethical Consideration #5: Examining Researcher Bias**

The participant-researcher found great value creating and sustaining a PLC at NGES as a part of a continuous effort towards promoting an environment of meaningful collaboration and reflection among the elementary ELA teachers at the school. As one of the instructional leaders at NGES, serving in the capacity of Assistant Principal, the participant-researcher believed that the elementary ELA teachers at NGES would also find it beneficial to be a part of such a PLC. Before conducting this Action Research Study, however, the participant-researcher had to come to terms with the fact that the teacher-participants may not have the same feelings regarding the ELA PLC at NGES, and that the data generated from Action Research Study may be contradictory to her personal beliefs regarding PLCs. This was very critical, if the Action Research Study was to yield valid results. Because impartiality and objectivity can be difficult, the participant-researcher sought to reflect on her role in the research at every stage.

To reduce researcher bias, the participant-researcher included each of the elementary ELA teachers at NGES in the Action Research Study. The participant-researcher did not limit teacher-participants’ involvement to those individuals whom she thought would provide more favorable data. The participant-researcher was sure not to assume that any of the teacher-participants valued PLCs, collaboration, or the practice of reflective teaching. Additionally, the participant-researcher included the teacher-participants in the data analysis and interpretation process, as well as included the teacher-participants in the creation of the Action Plan, to ensure that the voices of the teacher-participants were heard.
Plan for Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

The participant-researcher provided the teacher-participants with a brief overview of the nature and purpose of the study. The participant-researcher placed emphasis on the benefits of the study to the teacher-participants, stressing how their responses would be analyzed and shared with them to ensure that their voices were heard correctly. Additionally, the participant-researcher shared with the teacher-participants that they would work alongside her in creating an Action Plan to improve the existing PLC at their school, based on their current perceptions of the PLC. The participant-researcher also ensured anonymity and confidentiality.

At the onset of each interview, the participant-researcher asked the teacher-participants a few ice-breaker questions such as job title, responsibilities, time in the profession, etc. The intent of such questions was to better prepare the teacher-participants for the interview questions more specifically related to the research study, and to prepare the teacher-participants to better engage in the interview process. Each question designed by the participant-researcher was broad and open-ended (not leading to any specific type of response), which allowed the teacher-participants autonomy in constructing their responses. Whenever appropriate, the participant-researcher asked follow-up questions with a probe to obtain a more in-depth answer or to follow up on a point of interest.

To transcribe the interview, the participant-researcher printed each question contained in the “Semi-Structured Interview Guide” (Appendix B) on its on sheet of paper. Within the blank spaces on each sheet, the participant-researcher recorded the teacher-participants’ responses utilizing appropriate key words and/or
phrases. Additionally, the participant-researcher tape-recorded each interview with the teacher-participants. Tape-recording each interview with the teacher-participants was vital so the participant-researcher could give the teacher-participants full attention during their individual interviews. The tape-recordings of the teacher-participants’ interviews were also used to “fill in the blanks” during data analysis. At the end of each individual interview, the participant-researcher asked each teacher-participant if there was anything else that he or she would like to share. The participant researcher thanked each teacher-participant for participating in the study. Additionally, at the end of each interview, the participant-researcher reminded the teacher-participant that he or she should feel free to contact her if they had any additional questions regarding their participation in the study.

**Plan for Data Analysis**

The participant-researcher followed the three-step process of Parson and Brown (2002) to analyze the data collected, for this Action Research Study. The first step, organizing the data, required identifying similar types of information within the interviews and then coding them to represent the information. Second, after creating descriptions for the different groups of coded data, the participant-researcher determined how the categories were connected to the research question presented in the study and whether the data, in fact, answered that question. During the last phase, interpretation, the participant-researcher sought to gain a better understanding of the teacher-participants’ overall perceptions their existing PLC, as well as their conceptualizations of a PLC which would enable them to support each other as members of a reflective and a collaborative environment focused on improving their curriculum, pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.
Plan for Reflecting with Participants

The participant-researcher reflected with the teacher-participants during each phase of the Action Research process, as outlined below. During the first stage, the planning stage of the process, once the participant-researcher had identified a topic, gathered information, conducted a review of related literature, and had developed a research plan, she scheduled a meeting with the teacher-participants in the conference room of NGES and provided them with an overview of the study. During the meeting, the participant-researcher facilitated a conversation with the teacher-participants regarding their thoughts of the significance of the study, as presented to them. Additionally, the participant-researcher provided the teacher-participants with an informed consent letter (Appendix A). The participant-researcher thanked the teacher-participants for coming to the meeting and provided them with final information regarding when and where to return their informed consent forms and highlighted her contact information for the teacher-participants, so that they could contact her if they had any additional questions.

Once the participant-researcher had conducted the individual, semi-structured interviews, with each of the eight teacher-participants, she coded, analyzed, interpreted, and created a draft of the research findings which was presented to the teacher-participants at a scheduled, follow-up focus group, held one month after the interviews in NGES’s conference room. This was the acting phase. The purpose of reviewing the research findings with the teacher-participants was to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on the findings of the study. The primary purpose of reflecting with the teacher-participants during this stage was to ensure that their voices were captured accurately during the interview process.
During the third stage, development, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants dialogued about the research findings, during their focus group meeting. The participant-researcher made notes of the teacher-participants’ thoughts and recommendations for any changes that needed to be made. The participant-researcher then reviewed a brief power-point presentation with the teacher-participants which highlighted a review of related literature regarding PLCs and PLCs for ELA teachers which resulted in increased student achievements in ELA. After the power-point presentation, the participant-researcher divided the teacher-participants into groups, tasking them with comparing their existing PLC to the PLCs discussed in the literature. The participant-researcher, alongside the teacher-participants, reflected on the research findings and the teacher-participants’ comparisons of their PLC to the PLCs discussed in the literature. Then the participant-researcher and teacher-participants began drafting an Action Plan for the improved PLC at NGES.

The participant-researcher and teacher-participants reflected on the entire process—from beginning to end—noting what believed went well, recommendations for future research, and their feelings regarding the effectiveness of the Action Research Study. Was the Research Question answered and did the Action Plan serve its purpose? The participant-researcher and teacher-participants presented their findings, as a part of their school district’s Professional Development day. Their presentation was one of the five sessions in which the teachers and administrators of their school district had the option of attending. The session, like the title of the Action Research Study, was entitled, “Promoting a Culture of Collaboration and Reflection Through a Professional Learning Community.”
Devising an Action Plan

The Action Plan resulting from this Action Research Study was created by the participant-researcher and the eight teacher-participants that were involved in the study during a focus group and follow up dialogue via Google Drive. During this phase, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants were interested in using what they had learned to form a way forward. In other words, developing an Action Plan was the next step. To maintain organization throughout the Action Planning process, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants developed a “Steps to Action Chart” (Mills, 2011), which consisted of the following components of study: findings; recommendations for action related to the question; responsible stakeholders; permission for implementation; future data collectors; timelines; and necessary resources.

Table 3.1 Steps to Action Chart (Adapted from Mills, 2011)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Summary of Research Questions and Findings</th>
<th>Recommended Actions</th>
<th>Who is Responsible? T=Teachers S=Students P=Principal PA=Parent/s O=Others</th>
<th>Who Needs to Be Consulted, etc.?</th>
<th>Who Will Collect Data?</th>
<th>Time Line</th>
<th>Resources Necessary</th>
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The participant-researcher drew the Mills (2011) “Steps to Action Chart” (Figure 1.1) on a sheet of paper, to be drafted alongside the teacher-participants during a scheduled focus group. Upon completion of the draft “Steps to Action Chart,” the
participant-researcher concluded the focus group and typed/uploaded the completed chart into Google Drive, which allowed the teacher-participants and the participant-researcher to make suggestions for revisions, as needed. The participant-researcher and teacher-participants’ use of Google Drive will be discussed further in Chapter Five of this Action Research Study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided a description of the research methods utilized in the present Action Research Study. The participant-researcher employed qualitative research methodologies that consisted of individual semi-structured interviews and a separate focus-group with the eight teacher-participants involved in the study. The data was analyzed using Parson and Brown’s (2002) three-step data analysis process to determine the teacher-participants’ perceptions of their existing elementary ELA PLC to improve the existing PLC by promoting a more reflective and collaborative environment that encouraged them to interrogate their ELA practices. The following chapter will present an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER FOUR
TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Four is to present the findings of the present qualitative Action Research Study aimed at describing eight elementary ELA teachers’ conceptualizations and perceptions of a PLC at NGES. In addition to the findings, the implications for the findings are also reported in this chapter. As an administrator at NGES, I was responsible for implementing a PLC. My role as the participant-researcher in the present study was to work with ELA teachers to increase students’ scholarly activity in literacy. To implement this change, the goal was including teachers’ voices regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the present PLC as well as to design an Action Plan which will be presented in Chapter Five of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The participant-researcher, along with the teacher-participants, plan to utilize the Action Plan to design an improved PLC at NGES which promotes a more reflective and collaborative environment amongst teachers of ELA where teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity in literacy.

The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) concerned eight elementary (third through fifth grade) ELA teachers at NGES who needed to have their voices heard in the existing PLC, to address the PoP of this study and to improve the existing PLC. Building-level administrators and Reading Coaches are required to meet with all ELA teachers (4K
through fifth grade), twice a month (every other Wednesday), to engage in studies regarding varying instructional strategies for teaching reading and writing. Input from the teachers regarding their feelings about the PLC model was not solicited before the present Action Research study. Data was collected from eight teacher-participants (third through fifth grade) who in addition to teaching ELA, also taught the other three “core” subjects (i.e., Math, Science, and Social Studies). Collectively, the teacher-participants have 99 years of teaching experience.

**Overview of Data Collection Methods**

The participant-researcher employed qualitative research methods to collect data from these eight teacher-participants. They were assigned the following pseudonyms to protect their anonymity: Mrs. Watts (nine years, third grade), Mrs. Mack (22 years, third grade), Mr. Giles (four years, third grade), Ms. Heath (three years, fourth grade), Mrs. Simmons (11 years, fourth grade), Mr. Harrison (26 years, fourth grade), Mr. Morrison (10 years, fifth grade), Ms. Taylor (14 years, fifth grade).

The participant-researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, individually, with each of the teacher-participants, and then facilitated a follow-up focus group one month after the interviews. The interview data was coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the participant-researcher first and then reflected upon with the teacher-participants in the follow-up focus group (Metler, 2014). The participant-researcher, along with the teacher-participants reflected on the data collected to create an Action Plan which is detailed in Chapter Five of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The Action Plan was designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES by promoting a more reflective and collaborative environment where teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum
and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity. Please refer to Chapter Three: Action Research Methodology of this Action Research Study for a more in-depth review of the methodologies employed by the participant-researcher.

**Overview of Ethical Considerations**

As the participant-researcher, I worked hard to ensure consent, confidentiality, and anonymity in the present study. First, I drafted and distributed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) to each of the eight teacher-participants with an overview of the research study. Additionally, I adhered to Metler & Charles’ (2011) three ethical principles of Positionality, Building Trust, and Reliability (or credibility) as this was a qualitative study. Since I served as the Assistant Principal at NGES, I was aware of my position of power throughout ongoing analysis and reflection during the data collection and analysis phases. As an insider/outsider, I constantly reminded myself that I was subjected to the challenges associated with both perspectives. As an insider, I had to be sure to separate my personal experiences from those of the teacher-participants and continuously confront questions of potential bias in my research. As an outsider, I had to work to prove myself trustworthy of the opinions and feelings of the teacher-participants.

As the Assistant Principal I understood that the teacher-participants could be hesitant in disclosing their sincere feelings regarding the current PLC at NGES. Therefore, during the very first meeting with the teacher-participants, I explained to them that I was conducting this Action Research study because of a genuine desire to “hear their voices,” and to work alongside them in creating a PLC that was more reflective of their beliefs and values and that gave voice to their concerns as well as enabled them to mentor each other and novice teachers in the future. Professional development should
never be a top-down approach. Educational reform efforts that institutionalize professional learning structures should enable teachers to take control of their chosen profession. Those reforms honor who they are as teachers and benefits the children who are in their care.

Taking a reflective stance, I provided an opportunity for the eight teacher-participants to attend a follow-up focus group, one month after the individual interviews, to reflect upon the research findings. Copies of the semi-structured interview transcripts, along with a copy of the research findings draft, were distributed to each of the teacher-participants and reviewed collectively, as a means of ensuring that the findings were truly reflective of their perceptions of the current PLC for ELA teachers at NGES. I also wanted the study to empower them for future in-service opportunities that moved them from the margin to the center of professional development. I enhanced the credibility of the data collected by maintaining a detailed account of how the data was collected and analyzed for their perusal.

Finally, as a means of addressing the challenges of researcher bias and assumptions, I was careful not to assume that the teacher-participants valued PLCs (either in general, or specifically the PLC at NGES), collaboration, or the practice of reflective teaching. More importantly, I was careful to include the teacher-participants in the data analysis and interpretation processes and in the creation of the Action Plan, to ensure that the voices of the teacher-participants were heard. Please refer to Chapter Three: Research Methodologies for a more in-depth review of the participant-researcher’s adherence to ethical considerations and informed consent (see Appendix A).
Findings of the Study

The participant-researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the eight teacher-participants. The three themes that emerged from the study were defining the PLC; identifying a purpose; and supportive conditions.

Defining the PLC

First, determining how the eight teacher-participants conceptualized, or defined a PLC was crucial to the project. The participant-researcher began by asking the teacher-participants to provide a working definition of a PLC, and then focused specifically on their experiences in their PLC at NGES. The following patterns emerged from the data collected regarding the ways in which the teacher-participants defined a PLC: critical interrogation; inquiry and problem-solving; and collaboration.

The data indicated that some of the teacher-participants thought of a PLC as a place where they could “critically interrogate their practices.” For example, Mrs. Watts shared

When I think of a Professional Learning Community, I think of a group of people who are all learners. Well, more specifically for me, a group of teachers who are all learners. A Professional Learning community is a group of teachers who are all focused on learning new ways for their students to be successful, they are learning about new practices, and they are learning from each other. They are learning about what other teachers in the building are doing that has been proven to be successful. A Professional Learning Community is a group of teachers who are reflective and always questioning what they are doing, in order to become better
at their craft. This type of reflection can be done independently, cooperatively, or both. For example, sometimes I ask myself, “What was I expecting my students to learn? Did they learn it? How do I know that they learned it? What types of changes would I make to this lesson if I were to teach it again?” These are all questions that I ask myself to help me become a better teacher.

Mrs. Watts’s response is consistent with the scholarly literature, especially the definition of a PLC created by Mitchell & Sackney (2000) and Toole & Louis (2002) that emphasizes the inclusivity and team work parts of the PLC.

In another example of data collected, Mrs. Mack said that a critical interrogation process required her to consistently ask herself, “Why?” “How?” and “What?” She also mentioned “reflection” as an important part of the process of critical interrogation.

I think a Professional Learning Community is a group of people who want to learn about each other and who want to share and help each other. A Professional Learning Community is a group of people who are always asking themselves the “Why? How? and What?” questions as a means to becoming better teachers, or better at whatever job, really. They rely on their colleagues to help them reflect on these questions, in order to become better, as well.

Mr. Giles stated,

I believe a Professional Learning Community is a place where teachers can share their different ideas and piggyback off of each other’s thoughts. A Professional Learning Community is a place where everyone is learning new things and ideas to become better, because no one person knows it all. It’s all about the members
of the Professional Learning Community communicating in order to grow and to become better.

Mrs. Mack and Mr. Giles’ conceptualizations of a PLC, with an emphasis on shared practice, are consistent with scholarly literature which suggests that the learning that occurs in a PLC is “a habitual activity [in which] the group learns how to learn together continually” (Hord, 2009, p. 40). Such shared practice is concerned with seeking answers to questions about what students need to learn, how we will know it has been learned, and how we will act when students struggle. Additionally, Mr. Giles’ beliefs that “no one person knows it all,” expands on Hord’s thinking about how groups “learn together” (p. 40). By acknowledging limitations, the PLC creates a space of collaboration.

Servage (2008) suggests that one of the three principles guiding a PLC is inquiry and problem solving in daily teaching practices. Several of the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations of a PLC were in line with Servage’s thinking.

Ms. Taylor shared,

*When I think of a Professional Learning Community, I think of a place where teachers are working together to reach a common goal. In my mind, that goal is for all of us teachers to become better, by sharing our ideas and new research for teaching and learning so that we can better help our students. A Professional Learning Community is a place where teachers share their ideas, share what’s working for them, and ask for advice on things that are not going well in their classrooms. A Professional Learning Community is a place where we reflect on what is presently happening in our classrooms, alongside our colleagues, and brainstorm ways to reach more of our students.*
Mrs. Simmons shared,

A Professional Learning Community is a place where teachers share ideas about instructional practices and share what has worked and didn’t work when teaching certain things in their own classrooms.

Mr. Harrison declared

I think, and this is just my personal opinion, that a Professional Learning Community is a group of people, in our case teachers and administrators, working together, sharing their knowledge and ideas, and creating plans for reaching their individual and collective goals. A Professional Learning Community is an accountability system where each of its members are committed to engaging in problem-solving activities to ensure the success of each of its members.

The teacher-participants conceptualize a PLC as a vehicle for inquiry and problem solving, to achieve a common goal. The PLC also gives the teachers a space to work through ideas they normally work on by themselves. The PLC allows them to ask each other about different practices, voice reservations about curriculum, and interpret student data.

Teachers highlighted the significance of investigating the relationship between instructional practices and student achievement. For example, Mr. Morrison noted,

A Professional Learning Community is a group of teachers, or people in general, because I’m sure more than just us teachers have to work together on things, who have a common need, goal, and vision. In a Professional Learning Community, these people work together, share ideas with each other, and help each other to achieve the groups’ goals. Also, a Professional Learning Community refers to a
group of people who are interested in reflecting on their ways of thinking and doing, as a means to increasing their students’ performance in the classroom.

Ms. Taylor suggested

A Professional Learning Community is a learning environment where people are supportive of each other and want to see other people succeed. It is a group of people with a common interest working together to make sure that everyone is working towards and able to achieve the common goal. A Professional Learning Community is a group of people who spends time reflecting on the “Why?” and is always making the necessary changes to their ways of thinking and doing, in order to become better teachers and to reach more students.

These comments are consistent with McLaughlin & Talbert (2006) who suggest that a Professional Learning Community is a professional development model in which teachers work collaboratively to reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the students in their classes.

The teacher-participants’ perceptions of their current ELA PLC were not reflective of the ways) in which they conceptualized a PLC, in terms of defining a PLC. DuFour & Reeves (2016) argue that the gap between the definition and perception is common because PLCs are not adequately supported or implemented. Rather than changing the structure of their days (as in my earlier example of Westwood where they altered the school schedule), schools and teachers rely on cosmetic fixes such as labeling, putting PLC on the meeting title or readings that are not backed up with a strategy for implementing what the teachers have learned. The teacher-participants’ perceptions of
their current ELA PLC were reflective of those PLC models in which DuFour & Reeves (2016) coined as “PLC Lite.” Mrs. Mack shared:

Sometimes, it feels as though I am more a part of a graduate course than a Professional Learning Community. I mean, we get good information, most of the time, but for the most part, I feel as though it is a lot of “sit and get.” The stuff that we talk about sometimes relate to me and sometimes is does not. When the stuff that we talk about does not relate to me, I often feel like it is a big waste of time to have to sit through that for about an hour to an hour and a half each week.

Mrs. Simmons stated,

Our PLC is more so of a big book study, in my opinion. I mean our “Instructional Strategies” book, you know the Jennifer Serravallo book, it is really good, but do we really have to dedicate so much time to covering everything in the book? I could really skim it myself and use it as a resource on an as-needed basis. I would really like to spend more time talking about things that are currently happening in our classrooms, with our students.

Ms. Taylor stated,

We get a lot of information. We never talk about how to apply it, though. Actually, we are never even asked if we’ve applied it. Like, what would or should this look like in our classrooms. Sometimes, I’ll talk to my team-members about the information, if something really catches my attention, but honestly, and I feel horrible saying this, most of the papers and handouts get shoved in a folder and never looked at again. It’s almost like sitting in a class every other week instead of being a part of a learning community.
Mr. Giles’ perceptions of NGES’s current ELA PLC sums up everyone’s feelings when he stated, “Our PLC is more like a weekly workshop or training class focused on different ELA instructional strategies.” PLC becomes an empty label, because it is applied to any group of people within an educational system. Because it does not give support (as Ms. Taylor says, the content is never discussed, and she rarely talks about it herself), the PLC becomes an unwanted obligation and exercise in futility. The teacher-participants did not perceive their current PLC as a true PLC, but as “PLC Lite.” The teacher-participants’ conceptualizations of a PLC and perceptions of their established PLC were used to formulate a working definition for NGES’s improved PLC which will guide the works of their PLC and can be found in the subsequent Action Plan of the present Action Research Study.

**Purpose**

After investigating how the teacher-participants defined a Professional Learning Community (PLC), the participant-researcher sought to examine how the teacher-participants conceptualized the ‘purpose’ of a PLC. The participant-researcher achieved this task by asking the teacher-participants to discuss their feelings regarding the primary aims, or objectives of a PLC. The following three patterns emerged from the data collected regarding the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations of the ‘purpose’ of a PLC: student learning; collaboration; and student data and student growth. Three vital questions motivate the work of PLCs (DuFour, 2004b). The three questions which guide the work of PLCs are: what do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student has trouble learning? DuFour suggests that when a school begins to operate as a Professional Learning
Community, teachers become conscious of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The consciousness leads the teachers to use the PLC to help their students and create a better community.

DuFour (2004b) stated that collaboration was one of the guiding principles of PLCs. He suggested that in a Professional Learning Community, teachers worked in teams and engaged in a continuous cycle of questions that encouraged deep team learning. He suggested that this practice of a Professional Learning Community provided every teacher someone to turn to and talk to and resulted in improved individual and collective practices of classroom teachers, as well as higher levels of student achievement. The data indicated that the teacher-participants conceptualized collaboration as an integral and significant part of a Professional Learning Community. The teacher-participants’ perceptions of the significance of collaboration, as a part of their conceptualization of a Professional Learning Community are as follows. Mr. Morrison shared,

I benefit from collaborating with others, personally, because we all think differently. Hearing other people’s ideas and interpretations always can shed a different light on my thinking or ways of doing things so that ultimately my students benefit the most.

Mr. Harrison shared

I definitely consider collaboration as an advantage. We all have something to share with and learn from others. This is true, even for teachers across grade levels. The upper grades can share with the younger grades and hopefully they
can go back and help bridge the gap. Collaboration is a win-win situation for all involved when everyone participates equally.

Mrs. Mack stated

I definitely feel that collaboration is an advantage if for nothing else than having a different view point to discuss. Through collaboration, teachers are able to share ideas and to share resources. This type of sharing is an absolute plus for teachers—oftentimes, the older teachers have a wealth of resources, but lot of the time, the younger teachers have new and exciting ideas that can change a boring lesson into something the children will remember for a long time.

Similarly, Ms. Taylor saw collaboration as an advantage because “the dialogue fosters creative and innovative ideas that may not have been considered otherwise.” Mrs. Watts shared, “collaboration is the most attainable way of giving and receiving valuable information for the growing world of education.”

Ms. Heath stated

Collaboration has its advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that you get to hear fresh ideas and what works for other teachers that you may can try in your own classroom. The biggest disadvantage is when you get a lot of teachers together, most of the time it ends up being a gripe session which can kill the morale of the school. Though, I think having a facilitator to keep everyone on track could really help with that.

Ms. Heath and Mr. Harrison’s perception of collaboration reflects DuFour’s beliefs regarding the need for collaboration to be modeled. Because a certain approach to PLCs has been so ingrained (a “gripe session” or a meaningless meeting), members of the PLC
will have to establish exactly what they want from these meetings and avoid unhelpful behavior.

Every teacher/team of teachers participates in a continuous process of categorizing the current levels of student achievement, creating a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing intermittent evidence of progress. The data indicated that the teacher-participants also perceived data analysis and goal setting as a vital part of a PLC. The teacher-participants’ conceptualization of goal-setting and data analysis as a part of a Professional Learning Community are as follows:

Mr. Giles stated

When I think of a Professional Learning Community, I think of a group of people who are working to achieve a clearly defined goal or clearly defined goals, but not too many goals at one time, though. The members of the Professional Learning Community meet to discuss student data (past and present), analyze the processes that went into achievements/failures, formulate a plan to move forward, and communicate that plan with the appropriate stakeholders.

Similarly, Mr. Harrison stated, “As a Professional Learning Community, the members analyze students’ previous data, as well as current student data, develop goals for improvement, formulate plans for achieving set goal, and monitor progress towards meeting the set goal(s).” When teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students, and individual teachers can call on their team
colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. Such a practice is beneficial because each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team.

Several of the teacher-participants’ conceptualized the purpose of data analysis, as a component of a PLC, in this very way. Mr. Morrison suggested,

In order for the dialogue of a PLC to be meaningful, in my opinion, teachers must have data to discuss and have data to compare their data to, if this makes sense.

When I think of a Professional Learning Community, I think of teachers who not only plan for instruction, but also plan for the ways in which they will assess their students, together. They come back together and compare how well, or how horrible, their students did in comparison to their colleagues. This allows for the teachers to discuss what they feel resulted in their students’ success or lack thereof. It is these types of conversations which helps the teachers to become better and has the greatest impact on student success.

Ms. Heath stated,

In order for teachers to improve their craft/increase student performance, it is so important that teachers review and analyze student data alongside their peers, or should I say their colleagues. It’s the only way to have a meaningful conversation about what is working and what is not working. I mean, if I see that my students did horrible on an assessment that your students did well on, that is going to make me want to know what you did well so that I can try some of the same things with my students. Yeah, you can modify how you do things according to the data, alone, but why not use the data as a catalyst for dialogue. Not only will this add to your teacher toolbox, but may also increase your students’ performance.
Mrs. Watts stated,

Analyzing data is a critical component of a Professional Learning Community because it promotes reflection. Analyzing data resulting from a common assessment, however, has the power to not only promote reflection, but also to facilitate meaningful conversations, or the sharing of ideas. Teachers get to talk about what they believe yielded certain results: good, bad, or indifferent. Such dialogue impacts both teacher and student performance.

The data reflected the teacher-participants’ beliefs regarding what they felt were the primary aims, or objective(s) of a meaningful PLC. The teacher-participants believed that a meaningful PLC provided opportunities for meaningful collaboration focused on supporting each other in: the continuous examinations of their instructional beliefs and practices; the creation of specific and measurable goals; the ongoing process of reviewing and analyzing student data as a means for professional reflection.

To examine the teacher-participants’ perceptions of their current PLC and how they aligned with the conceptualizations a PLC’s purpose, the participant-researcher asked, “Do you find your current ELA PLC purposeful? What could make your current ELA PLC more purposeful to you?” Mr. Morrison shared,

I don’t think that our ELA PLC is a complete waste of time. I mean, I just kind of wish we did more than read/discuss the Instructional Strategies book. I would like for us to spend more time talking about things that related specifically to the needs of our students, in order to make our PLC more purposeful.

Mrs. Mack shared,
Our current PLC would be more meaningful if we spent time in or with our specific grade groups or with our colleagues across grade levels. I think that some vertical dialogue would be good, because we could find out about the gaps that our children have and brainstorm ways to fill in those gaps, like how we could send our students to the next grade level better prepared to achieve the standards they need to in that grade.

The teacher-participants’ responses, regarding how they wished their current PLC was more specific to their needs and the needs of their students versus being more of a book study or “detached learning experience,” were consistent with the literature that states that, in PLCs, some of the purposes for teachers coming together should include, but aren’t limited to: studying standards; selecting research-based instructional strategies and assessment techniques; planning lessons; implementing lessons; and analyzing student work (Pritle & Tobia, 2014). The teacher-participants’ conceptualizations and perceptions of the PLC’s purpose guided the work of the focus group to determine the vision, mission, and core belief statements of the improved PLC at NGES which can be found in the subsequent Action Plan of this Action Research Study.

**Supportive Conditions**

Teague & Anfara (2012) suggest that supportive conditions are the glue that holds the various dimensions of a PLC together. Such supportive conditions refer to “relational conditions” (trust, respect, caring, relationships, recognition, celebration, risk taking, and reflective dialogue) and “structural conditions” (time and space for collaboration) (Teague & Anfara, 2012, p. 61). Trust, caring, and time must be in place to ensure that a PLC is successful.
When asked what she believed made a PLC successful, Mrs. Mack stated, “Well first of all, I have to trust you.” Mrs. Mack continued,

I think in order for a Professional Learning Community to be successful, all of its members must have a common vision and a clear set of goals. Most importantly, there cannot be a “Big Me and Little You” mentality within a Professional Learning Community.

Mr. Morrison shared, “Nobody is going to be willing to share their failures, or at least what they may consider to be their failures, with a group of people who they do not trust- I know I would not. Caring between members was also emphasized by the teacher-participants. Ms. Heath shared, “A PLC can only be successful if everyone has a vested interest in the work of the PLC and the people involved in the PLC.” Mr. Giles’ conceptualization of a successful PLC was quite like Ms. Heath’s as he stated, “A PLC can only be successful, in my opinion, if everybody cares about each other and our students’ success.” In agreement with Ms. Heath and Mr. Giles, Mrs. Simmons said that “I think that caring is a very important part of a Professional Learning Community. Nobody is going to feel comfortable sharing their weaknesses with you if they don’t trust you or feel as though you don’t care about them.”

Another element that emerged was time, though only two teacher-participants mentioned it. Mrs. Watts and Mr. Morrison referenced time as a component of a PLC’s success, in addition to the other attributes. Mrs. Watts stated, “I think a PLC can only be successful if the members have time to collaborate frequently.” Mr. Watts stated, “Time is an important attribute of successful PLC- teachers need time to reflect, to collaborate,
and to make sense of student data.” There are structural ways to provide this time, as demonstrated with the Westwood example earlier in this study.

Since these three attributes (trust, care, time) all contribute to a feeling of support, the participant-researcher asked, “Do you feel supported as a member of your current Professional Learning Community?” Mrs. Simmons replied, “I guess.” She continued, “I guess it can be considered a two-way street, it’s not like I’m asking to be supported, specifically. I just try to get through each session.”

Mr. Giles replied

Yes and no. I said yes, when I thought about my colleagues in general. If ever I need someone to bounce ideas off of, or to talk to someone about trying something new or different, I have certain people that I can go to, outside of our assigned ELA PLC for support- these are people that I have known for a while and people that I trust.

Mr. Morrison stated, “I feel like I work with a good group of people. They are smart and bring a lot to the table with them. We oftentimes plan together as a grade-level and talk about ways to motivate our students about what we are learning about.” Mrs. Watts shared,

I do feel supported by my school family and especially by my grade level. I trust these guys. We have all been on the same team for at least five years. We are always sharing ideas with each other, and planning with each other.

While the teacher-participants trusted their colleagues, and felt supported by their colleagues, the teacher-participants did not perceive their current ELA PLC, specifically, as being a factor that supported them professionally.
Interpretation of Results of the Study

The teacher-participants collectively conceptualized a PLC as a group of individuals, namely teachers, who are continuously learning and growing together. The teacher-participants believed that the members of a PLC are all dedicated to discovering new ways for their students to be successful and to experience success at higher rates. They suggest that, as members of a PLC, teachers are committed to their professional growth and to each other. Each member of a PLC is accountable to each other and are equal members of the community. Finally, the data indicated that the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC as a group of individuals with a common purpose, mission, or goal and are all committed to helping each other achieve their goal(s).

Contrary to their conceptualization, their perception of their current ELA PLC was that of a book study, or as a graduate course. The teacher-participants indicated that there was not much time for collaboration as a part of their current PLC model, instead, they perceive their current PLC model to be akin to a training session where the information is presented in a sit-and-get nature. The data also revealed that the teacher-participants believed that their current PLC lacked the component of application, or follow-through with what is being discussed.

In terms of ‘purpose’, the data indicated that the teacher-participants believed that a PLC must focus on student learning, foster collaboration between teachers, and use student data to promote student growth. The teacher-participants suggested that a PLC should be an environment for teachers to share, plan, and reflect. Teacher-participants also believed that, in addition to planning for engaging instruction, the purpose of a PLC was for teachers to plan for ways to assess their students. Student assessment results, in
their opinions, being their collective guides to determining what to do next, to increase levels of student achievement, or success.

Ultimately, the teacher-participants believed that their current PLC lacked attention to their unique needs and the needs of their students. The teacher-participants suggested that their PLCs could become more purposeful to them and for them if the topics discussed were reflective of their needs for their students, if they had the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from other grade-levels and if they spent more time engaging in analyzing student data. The teacher-participants believed that conversations with colleagues across grade levels and engaging in data analysis would be significant because they could identify gaps in student knowledge and mastery of standards, then create plans for increasing student performance.

In terms of ‘supportive conditions,’ the data indicated that the teacher participants believed that, more than anything, trust was a major factor to ensuring the success of a PLC. The teacher-participants perceived trust to be important to ensuring the success of a PLC, because it can be tough to share areas of challenges with other people. Next, the teacher-participants indicated that caring was also important to the success of a PLC—caring about each other and, most importantly, the success of the students. The teacher-participants perceived their school, or grade-level were supportive, or operated under supportive conditions. However, the teacher-participants did not believe that their current ELA PLC was supportive of their needs.

The findings of the study indicate that the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations of a meaningful PLC are not aligned to their perceptions of their current PLC. Without the two being reflective of each other, the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations and
perceptions, the teacher-participants will continue to find their PLC meaningless and not beneficial. Such feelings toward their PLC totally defeat the purpose and intentions of the PLC. Therefore, the participant-researcher and the teacher-participants worked together, using the research findings, to create an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES. The Action Plan is included in Chapter Five of this Action Research Study.

**Conclusion**

The present Action Research Study heard the voices of eight elementary ELA teachers to improve the existing PLC at NGES. Prior to the implementation of the PLC, input from the teacher-participants was not solicited, leaving them feeling as if their needs were not being met. Through qualitative Action Research methodologies, the participant-researcher sought to answer the following research question, “What are NGES’ elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of a PLC?”

The research findings, discovered via individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the teacher-participants were organized into three major themes. The three major themes and patterns that arose during the data analysis process of the present study were defining the PLC (critical interrogation, inquiry and problem-solving, and working collaboratively); identifying a purpose (student learning, collaboration, and student data and student growth); and supportive conditions (trust, caring members, and time). The research findings, contained in this chapter, indicated that the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC differently than they perceived their current PLC. Because of the lack of continuity between the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations and perceptions, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants concluded that the teacher-participants
did not find much value in their current PLC. Consequently, the data was used to guide the work of the follow-up focus group, with the participant-researcher and teacher-participants, to create an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES.
CHAPTER FIVE
ACTION PLAN FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Five is to present the Action Plan that was created by the participant-researcher and the teacher-participants designed to improve the English Language Arts (ELA) Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Next Generation Elementary School (NGES) in South Carolina. The Action Plan will promote a more reflective and collaborative environment amongst teachers of ELA; one where they support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity in literacy. The teacher-participants and the participant-researcher where responsible for four elements of the action plan: creating a mission statement; developing a vision; developing belief statements; and establishing goals for the improved PLC.

The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) for the present study involved the lack of teacher voice among eight elementary (third through fifth grade) ELA teachers at NGES. Before the research study, building-level administrators and Reading Coaches met in a PLC Model with all ELA teachers (4K through fifth grade) twice a month (every other Wednesday) to engage in studies regarding varying instructional strategies for teaching children ELA reading and writing. However, the teachers were not consulted during the initial construction of the PLC, leaving many ELA teachers feeling that their needs were not being met and that their voices were not heard. Their feelings were not
unwarranted, as they had no voice in creating their own professional learning organization.

The research question guiding the present Action Research Study was as follows: what are NGES elementary ELA teachers’ perceptions of a PLC? The research question enabled the participant-researcher to investigate how the teacher-participants both conceptualized a new PLC and how the teacher-participants perceived their old PLC. Consequently, the research findings were reflected upon by the participant-researcher and the teacher-participants and were used to create an Action Plan for an improved PLC that provided teachers with enough time to meet as teacher teams to plan together, analyze student data together, and to create goals for increased levels of student achievement.

Eight ELA teachers agreed to participate in the present study. Qualitative data was collected from the teacher-participants. Each teacher was assigned the following pseudonym to protect her or his identity and anonymity: Mrs. Watts (nine years, third grade), Mrs. Mack (22 years, third grade), Mr. Giles (four years, third grade), Ms. Heath (three years, fourth grade), Mrs. Simmons (11 years, fourth grade), Mr. Harrison (26 years, fourth grade), Mr. Morrison (10 years, fifth grade), and Ms. Taylor (14 years, fifth grade).

NGES has a student population comprised of 379 students from grades 4K-fifth grade. The racial make-up during the 2016-2017 school year was 63% White, 27% African American, and 10% “Other.” NGES has 16 classroom teachers, five teaching assistants, two learning specialists, a reading coach, a curriculum coach, a speech pathologist, a teacher for gifted and talented students, and four teachers from special areas. NGES also has one principal and one assistant principal.
Participants were selected because they teach elementary-aged (third to fifth grade) students and they each teach ELA in a self-contained classroom. They are also responsible for teaching each of the other three “core subjects” (Math, Science, and Social Studies). For a more in-depth description of the research site at NGES, please refer to Chapter Three: Action Research Methodology of this dissertation.

Qualitative data comprised individual semi-structured interviews, with each of the eight teacher-participants and a follow-up focus group the teacher-participants. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes each and the follow up focus group, held one month after the completion of the individual interviews, lasted approximately two hours. Data was collected using audio and transcribed within 48 hours of collection. All tapes were destroyed after transcription to protect the participants’ anonymity. The interview and focus group transcriptions were then coded, analyzed, and interpreted by the participant-researcher and shared with the teacher-participants during the follow up focus group, scheduled one month after the individual interviews. In the focus group, over a period of two hours, the participant-researcher, along with the teacher-participants began creating an Action Plan designed to improve the existing PLC at NGES.

The research findings indicated that the ways in which the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC were not aligned to how they perceived their current PLC. These findings led to the Action Plan to form the new PLC, to provide the teacher-participants with a professional learning model that they would find more meaningful. This new PLC is designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers can speak freely about problems and issues they are having in their classroom.
and where they feel free to support each other in their endeavors to design and implement curriculum and pedagogy.

The new PLC will require an Action Plan that helps teachers do five things. The first is that the teachers will identify a PoP in their classrooms, then, second, support each other in talking about their PoPs. Third, they will develop plans of action for addressing their PoPs. The fourth step is that they will evaluate their progress towards meeting their goals before finally engaging in continuous reflection and collaboration, using student data as the basis for their relationships with one another.

**Action Researcher**

The participant-researcher reflected with the teacher-participants throughout the entire Action Research process. The participant-researcher identified a topic, gathered information, conducted a review of related literature, developed a research plan, and scheduled a meeting with the prospective teacher-participants to provide them with an overview of the study. During the meeting, the participant-researcher facilitated a conversation with the teacher-participants regarding their thoughts of the significance of the study, as presented to them.

After the data collection process (i.e. the semi-structured interviews), the participant-researcher drafted the research findings in a word document. The research findings were shared with the teacher-participants in the first follow-up focus group meeting, scheduled one month after the individual interviews. This was to ensure that the participant-researcher had indeed captured the teacher-participants’ perceptions of their PLC and conceptualizations of an improved PLC.
Also, during the focus group meeting, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants worked to start creating an Action Plan to improve the existing PLC at NGES. Together, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants reviewed the literature regarding PLCs, studied PLCs that resulted in increased student achievements in literacy, and reviewed the research findings once more, to determine what needed to be included in the Action Plan to make their existing PLC more meaningful to them.

The participant-researcher served as the Assistant Principal at NGES. Because of this, the participant-researcher assumed the role of insider-outsider researcher, during this Action Research Study. According to Naples (2003), “insider research has been identified as the study of one’s own social group or society” (p. 46) and outsider research is to the contrary and the researcher is not a part of the group being studied. The participant-researcher was an insider researcher because she was a member of the ELA PLC at NGES, and served as an instructional leader; however, she was also an outsider, because she was not an ELA teacher and was not directly a part of the everyday, direct experiences, shared by the ELA teachers at NGES. The participant-researcher was serving in a capacity that separated her from the teachers.

The participant-researcher only encountered one challenge during her attempts to effect educational change because of inquiry. The participant-researcher had to be sure to not internalize the responses of the teacher-participants regarding their perceptions of the current ELA PLC. As the Assistant Principal of NGES, the participant-researcher, along with the school’s Reading Coach, was responsible for a creating the current PLC focused on increasing students’ literacy achievement. The participant-researcher and the school’s Reading Coach invested a great deal of time in determining, in their mere opinions, how
to best meet the needs of the students and teachers at NGES, to improve the students’ levels of literacy achievement and was actually proud of and confident in the present PLC structure. Consequently, it was extremely difficult to hear the less-than-flattering perceptions that some of the teacher-participants held regarding the current PLC.

However, the participant-researcher was sure to stay reminded that the purpose and significance of this study was to reveal the voices of the eight ELA teacher-participants to formulate a plan for an improved PLC that promoted a more reflective and collaborative environment. Additionally, this Action Research Study sought to promote social justice, by recognizing that teachers represent a marginalized group whose voices often go unheard, as in this very instance with them being expected to participate in and be content with the PLC structure that was created without any input from them, to begin with. Therefore, even though the participant-researcher found it difficult to accept the honest perceptions of the teacher-participants, at times, she welcomed it, did not retaliate against them, and was sure to remain cognizant of the purpose and significance of the study.

**Planning an Action Plan**

The creation of the Action Plan began by the participant-researcher and the eight teacher-participants that were involved in the study, during a follow-up focus group that occurred one month following the completion of the individual, semi-structured interviews. During this phase of the Action Research Study, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants were interested in developing an Action Plan based on what they had learned from the research findings, shared at the onset of the focus group. As stated previously in this chapter, during the scheduled focus group meeting, after reviewing the
findings, the participant-researcher reviewed a brief power-point presentation with the teacher-participants which highlighted a review of related literature regarding PLCs and ELA PLCs which resulted in increased student achievements in literacy.

Consequently, the participants broke into groups to compare their existing PLC to the PLCs highlighted in the presentation. This enabled the teacher-participants to brainstorm possible Action Steps that could be taken, to improve their existing PLC. To maintain organization throughout the Action Planning process, the participant-researcher drew a “Steps to Action Chart” (Figure 4.1) on a sheet of chart paper, and completed/ filled-in the chart with the teacher-participants, as they shared their thoughts aloud. Upon completion of the draft “Steps to Action Chart,” the participant-researcher concluded the focus group and, the following day, typed/uploaded the completed chart into Google Drive, which allowed the teacher-participants and the participant-researcher to make suggestions for revisions, as needed.

**Action Plan**

The participant-researcher and teacher-participants, after reviewing the research findings, indicated that the following are the “Recommended Actions” that need to occur, to improve the existing PLC at NGES to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity. Defining and Structuring the PLC were the key components to the action plan.

To define the improved PLC at NGES, the participant-researcher and teacher- participants decided to employ Lunenburg’s (2010) four-step process to defining, or establishing a PLC. This was critical to both the participant-researcher and the teacher-
participants because, if the teacher-participants were to find value in their PLC, they had to be a part of defining the PLC. As a part of defining the improved PLC, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants were responsible for creating a mission statement, developing a vision, developing value statements, and establishing goals. The participant-researcher and teacher-participants were sure to adhere to Lunenburg’s (2010) guidelines for crafting each. For example, when crafting the mission statement, the participant-researcher charged the teacher-participants to seek to answer existential questions by thinking about how they could help their students learn how to learn. Contrary to the mission statement (what we do daily), the vision statement meant to highlight aspirations. Their value statements were to be representative of the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that they each vowed to exhibit to move closer to their shared vision. Finally, their goals were to describe the results they were trying to achieve.

To complete this task, the teacher-participants were divided into two groups and each group was responsible for collectively engaging in each of the four steps for establishing a PLC. The participant-researcher had previously familiarized the teacher-participants with Google Drive and the folder/documents that would be used to maintain the Action Plan. Each group was responsible for uploading their mission, vision, and value statements, as well as their goals for the improved PLC in Google Drive within two weeks after the focus group meeting.

Once each group’s document was uploaded, the participant-researcher read through the documents highlighting commonalities and differences and created a “clean,” draft copy of NGES’s improved PLC’s mission statement, vision statement, value statements, and goals. The teacher-participants were allotted another two weeks to
provide any additional feedback to the participant-researcher, if they desired, and the participant-researcher would make the necessary revisions. Additionally, by using Google Documents, the teacher-participants could see when changes were made to the document by the participant-researcher.

This action was recommended, because the teacher-participants found that their current PLC was ‘lite’ (DuFour, 2016). They believed that their PLC, in its current state, was more reflective of a book study or graduate course. Most importantly, the teacher-participants believed that the current PLC was not supporting them with their specific needs and the specific needs of their students. Therefore, engaging in Lunenburg’s (2010) four-step process enabled the teacher-participants to reflect on what they believed should be the mission, vision, values, and goals of their improved PLC, to establish a PLC more supportive of their needs and the needs of their students.

**New Mission Statement and New Vision**

The mission statement for the new PLC is: The elementary ELA teachers of NGES will work together as committed professionals dedicated to supporting each other to ensure that all students are included in an equitable learning environment that will enable them to be successful. The vision statement for the new PLC is: All students at NGES will read and write, on grade-level, because of their teachers’ commitment to using student data as a vehicle for meaningful collaboration, reflection, and the creation of goals for attaining student success.

**New Beliefs**

The belief statements guiding the new PLC are:
We believe in ensuring that our students are provided with our BEST, as high quality educators, everyday.

We believe in providing our students with high quality educational experiences.

We believe in making informed decisions to meet the unique needs of each of our students.

We believe in engaging our students in inquiry-based learning environments that supports their growth as responsible thinkers, problem solvers and decision makers.

We believe in providing students with a learning environment in which they feel safe, valued, and respected.

We believe that open, honest, and clear communication among staff, students, parents, community members, and administration is vital to the success of our students.

We believe in encouraging and fostering positive home-school relationships as a part of our efforts to ensuring that each of our students are successful.

**New Goals**

The goals of the new PLC are:

All ELA teachers will assume the role of an Action Researcher as a part of a commitment to continued student success in literacy. All teachers will uphold a trusting and honest collegial environment, among the members of their grade-levels and across grade-levels. All teachers will collect and
analyze student data to create individualized plans to support student growth and learning. Student data and student success will guide the collaborative and reflective processes of all teachers. Administrators will remain in constant communication with teachers and provide teachers with the necessary support to ensure that they are successful as educational professionals.

The research findings indicated that the teacher-participants believed that the three main purposes of a PLC were to focus on student learning, collaborate, and use student data to promote student growth. However, in their current PLC, the teacher-participants indicated that there is no time for collaboration or time for analyzing student data. Because of this, the participant-research and teacher-participants believed that it was critical to the success of the improved PLC to structure the PLC in a way that would afford the teachers time to collaborate with each other regarding their students’ data and to support each other with their specific needs.

In the current PLC model, all ELA teachers meet every other Wednesday (4k-fifth grades), in the media center to engage in learning about varying reading and writing strategies; however, this has not proven beneficial to the teachers, as determined by the research findings. Therefore, the participant-researcher tasked the teacher-participants with working in their assigned groups to consider the who, what, when, where, and why of structuring their PLCs in a way that would promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity. The teacher-participants were responsible for collectively drafting plans for structuring the improved PLC at NGES, in
their assigned groups, and uploading it to the folder that maintained the documents for this Action Plan. While completing this task, the teacher-participants considered the following questions: who should participate in the PLC? Should PLCs be specific to individual grade-levels? Why should the PLC meet in this way? These were just a few of the questions teachers considered.

The goal of this task was to gain some insight into how the teacher-participants felt their needs could be better met, because of participating in NGES’s PLC for ELA teachers. The teacher-participants had two weeks to complete this task. The participant-researcher monitored the work of the teacher-participants, as content contained in Google Docs can be viewed in “real-time” and each participant can “chime” in at any point to provide feedback. As the groups of teacher-participants drafted their plans for a revised structure for the improved PLC, the participant-researcher would oftentimes pose questions to ponder or posit a moment of clarification for the group members to reflect upon. At the end of the two-week period, the participant-researcher created a “clean copy” draft of the teacher-participants’ responses regarding a new structure for the improved PLC. The teacher-participants had two weeks to provide any feedback on the document, after the participant-researcher drafted this “clean copy.” The participant-researcher revised the draft, as necessary, according to the feedback of the teacher-participants.

New Structure

The structure for the new PLC will be as follows:

PLCs will be grouped based on grade-groups to plan more effectively, discuss trends in student performance, and share specific
strategies they found successful. They will meet once a week during their planning period in a different colleague’s room each time. Meeting in different rooms enables them to see authentic teacher and student artifacts while engaging their PLCs. During their PLC meetings, they will discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and student data.

The goal of this Action Plan was to address the needs and concerns of the eight teacher-participants, according to the research findings. The research findings indicated that the teacher-participants’ conceptualizations of a PLC were not reflected in the ways in which they perceived their current PLC, leaving them to feel as though the current PLC was not supporting their professional needs or the academic needs of their students. To address this issue, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants created an Action Plan that enabled them to define and structure an improved PLC capable of meeting their needs. Such a PLC would promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

**Facilitating Educational Change**

The participant-researcher plans to share the findings of this Action Research Study by serving as a moderator for one of the district’s Professional Development Day sessions, as requested by her superintendent. The session will be specifically for Reading Coaches, building-level administrators (i.e. Principals, Assistant Principals, and Curriculum Coaches), and ELA teachers. The goal of this Professional Development will be to provide administrators and instructional leaders with a framework for evaluating their current PLCs for ELA; additionally, the participant-researcher hopes that the
Professional Development will equip administrators and instructional leaders with a framework for re-evaluating any PLC in which the voices of the teachers went unheard during the planning and implementation stages.

The goal of the participant-researcher is to serve as an advocate for teachers. Too often, the voices of teacher go unheard, or worse, unsolicited regarding educational reform. Yet, they are expected to conform to and comply with the mandates placed before them by their local, state, and/or national leaders, and to just “make it work!” The participant-researcher, too, was guilty of treating teachers in the same manner, hence the PLC in which she created without input from the teachers and the focus of this Action Research Study. More than anything, the goal of the participant-researcher is to promote a culture of reflection and collaboration, not only among teachers, but also among educational leaders and teachers, alike. The research findings of this Action Research Study prove that educational leaders don’t have all the answers, or solutions, and that student success is a direct reflection of all stakeholders working together.

The major challenge faced by the participant-researcher, because of attempting to effect educational change, with a specific regard to this Action Research Study, was debunking any personal feelings about the existing ELA PLC at NGES, as the participant-researcher also serves as the Assistant Principal at NGES and was responsible for implementing the PLC at NGES. To address this challenge, the participant-researcher was sure to remain cognizant of the purpose of the Action Research Study and to remind herself of her sincere intentions to create a learning environment that was meaningful for the teachers and one that was reflective of their personal beliefs and values. Additionally, another challenge was relinquishing power. Too often, administrators feel as though they
must have all the right answers and that their jobs are to dictate everyone’s next move, for the sake of accountability. To address this challenge, the participant-researcher remained focused on what matters the most, which is creating an environment where teachers feel trusted and supported as professionals and, inevitably, student success will be the product of such a learning environment.

The participant-researcher will use this Action Research Study to provide a framework for change and to advocate for change, because of meaningful reflection. The participant-researcher plans to share the challenges she encountered during this Action Research Process, as well as strategies for overcoming those challenges. The message will be that challenges cannot be an excuse for avoiding change. Change is inevitable and necessary. But, to the detriment of some, never happens because of pondering the challenges that could arise, for too long a period.

Specifically, the participant-researcher will use this study to promote a culture of change by describing how the initial PLC was not serving its purpose and how the continuation of that model could have been detrimental to both the teachers and students of NGES. Additionally, the participant-researcher will seek to create a learning environment of scholarly practitioners by charging them with the task of continuously evaluating their practices, ways of thinking, and ways of doing, to see when change is necessary to ensuring that they are exemplifying their vision and mission and are progressing toward their goals.

Summary of Research Findings

The research findings of this Action Research Study were divided into the following three major themes: defining the PLC, identifying a purpose, and supportive
conditions. These findings revealed the relationship between how the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC and how the teacher-participants perceived their current PLC for ELA teachers. Determining how the teacher-participants conceptualized a PLC and how they perceived their current PLC was significant because it communicated the value that the teacher-participants found in the current PLC, which had been formed without their input.

The research findings indicated that the teacher-participants did not see the current PLC to be meaningful, nor did they find that the current PLC supported their needs or the needs of their students. Because the needs of the teacher-participants were not assessed prior to the implementation of the current PLC, the participant-researcher worked alongside the teacher-participants, utilizing the specific research findings, to create an Action Plan for an improved ELA PLC. This study is significant because it will provide elementary ELA teachers and school administrators with a framework for evaluating and improving their current ELA PLCs to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment that support ELA teachers in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study could be extended to evaluate the early-childhood teachers at NGES’s perceptions of the current PLC. Early-childhood teachers refers to those teachers who teach grades 4K through second. Additionally, this Action Research Study could be extended to evaluate the teacher-participants’ perceptions of the improved PLC for elementary ELA teachers at NGES. The Action Research Study involving the early-childhood teachers would utilize the same Action Research Methodologies employed...
within this current study. The participant-researcher would also use qualitative research methods to investigate the teacher-participants’ perceptions of the improved PLC; however, the participant-researcher would have the teacher-participants complete surveys, to determine their levels of satisfaction with the improved PLC and their suggestions for refinement. The participant-researcher would then work alongside the teacher-participants to address their areas of concerns.

**Conclusions**

The primary aim of this Action Research Study was to highlight the voices of the eight ELA teacher-participants regarding their conceptualization of and plan for fostering an improved PLC. The improved PLC would be designed to promote a more reflective and collaborative environment where ELA teachers support each other in their endeavors to improve curriculum and pedagogy and students’ scholarly activity. The identified Problem of Practice (PoP) was concerned with hearing the voices of eight elementary (third through fifth grades) ELA teachers to improve the existing PLC for the ELA teachers at NGES. The participant-researcher utilized qualitative research methods to investigate the research question guiding this Action Research Study, which was: What are NGES elementary teachers’ perceptions of a PLC?

The participant-researcher and the teacher-participants worked together during the entire Action Research Process from beginning to end. The research findings facilitated the participant-researcher and the teacher-participants’ work in creating the Action Plan included in the present study. Consequently, the participant-researcher and teacher-participants plan to use the Action Plan to exemplify the purpose of the Action Research Study which was to design an improved PLC, beginning in the fall of 2017.
REFERENCES


Maidenhead: Open University Press.


APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Date: August 1, 2106

Dear [Teacher],

My name is Erica Murdaugh and I am the Assistant Principal at our school and a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina where I am conducting research to examine elementary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers’ perceptions of our Professional Learning Community (PLC) for ELA teachers. Your agreement to participate in my interview and focus group are completely voluntary. Please read the following information about the research. If you do not want to participate, please sign and return this form by Wednesday August 31, 2016.

**Interview & Focus Group Content**
The interview and focus group gathers information about your perceptions toward our PLC and about your opinions regarding the levels of support that you feel exist currently within our PLC as well as your opinions about your opportunities for reflection with your peers and the ways we can work together to make our PLC more of a reflective and collaborative community.

**It is Voluntary**
You do not have to agree to be interviewed by me or attend my focus group. Teachers who participate will meet with me for one 60-minute interview at your convenience either before school, during your break period, or after school.

**It is Anonymous and Confidential**
Please be advised that all interviews will be confidential (not seen by others) and anonymous (no names will be recorded or attached to the interview transcripts or focus group transcripts—you cannot be identified).

**Benefits or Participating in the Survey and Focus Group**
The data generated will help teachers and administrators learn more about how to develop a PLC for ELA teachers that will form an Action Plan for the school aimed at improving students’ scholarly ELA activity and making the working environment at our school cooperative and reflective for ELA teachers.

**Potential Risks**
There are no known risks of physical harm to you for participating in the interviews or the focus group. You will not have to answer any questions unless you want to.
**Interview Review**

Beginning October 2016, a summary of opinions from the singular interviews will be distributed to the participants and a joint focus group will be held for approximately 2 hours at Next Generation Elementary School (NGES) on Monday October 24, 2016 to discuss the findings of the interviews and begin the formation of an action plan to improve our PLC for ELA teachers.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION** please contact Erica Murdaugh at 803-412-0423 OR russelec@email.sc.edu

If you do not wish to participate please sign and return the form to me by Wednesday August 31, 2016.

____________________________________________________________________________________

NAME__________________________

CONTACT INFORMATION

(EMAIL/PHONE):_____________________________________________________

I WILL PARTICIPATE________________DATE________________

I WILL NOT

PARTICIPATE________________DATE_____________________

____________________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX B

SEMI STRUCTURED- INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your experiences with our school’s Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the past? Do you plan to participate this year?

2. Tell me about other experiences you have had in schools or in your life where there was an organized community of scholars that were tasked with helping each other. Did those have any benefits for you? Can you tell me more about that?

3. Tell me about the English Language Arts (ELA) community at this school. Do you know the other ELA teachers? What recommendations do you have for the administration to enable ELA teachers to work more collaboratively together? Do you view collaboration as an advantage/disadvantage? Can you tell me more about that?

4. Tell me about any opportunities that you would like to see in place within a formal PLC that could enable you to reach your students better. Are there specific issues that you see in this particular school in your ELA classrooms where working with other teachers in the school could better enable you to reach these kids? Can you tell me more about that?