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Professional Learning Community: Perspectives of Rural School Teachers and Leaders

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and two children, who inspire and motivate me to reach my goals. This dissertation is also dedicated to my parents, who instilled a hard-work ethic in me. To all of my loved ones, friends, and colleagues, your supportive actions and words through this journey helped me tremendously. You inspire and motivate me to be a better person every day, not just for myself, but for you and others. Thank you for being there, even when I did not realize that I needed you.

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Abstract

This study addressed rural school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about the implementation and participation in professional learning communities (PLC) to impact teacher growth, increase student achievement, and improve instructional practices. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of rural administrators and teachers about PLCs within a rural West Texas school district. Research protocols were polished through a pilot study group that provided input to refine the survey and interview questions. The researcher administered a survey for all participants, conducted a one-on-one interview with administrators, and interviewed teachers in focus groups. Findings indicated that collaboration, implementation factors, and positive outcomes were vital to the successful implementation and participation in PLCs. Additional findings indicated that norms and culture impacted how effective PLC implementation and participation was for each campus. Administrators reported that the use of classroom walkthroughs and teacher observations helped them design PLC agendas and work. The researcher concluded that leadership factors for teachers impacted PLC implementation and participation. Both administrators and teachers expressed that PLC participation was vital for teacher and student success.

Keywords: accountability, collaboration, professional growth, professional learning community, rural school district, student achievement

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public school education is about educating all students for life after high school, and school systems have been under increasing pressure to improve student achievement (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). With this pressure, determining the best structures, support, and approaches to advance student learning outcomes while fostering school culture and developing teachers' instructional expertise can be a substantial undertaking (Pirtle, 2012). Recognizing that the teacher is a critical factor in student achievement (Marzano & Pickering, 2010), it is crucial that teachers have the resources to develop in a manner that enriches the learning environment.

Educators and policymakers are continuously looking to professional teacher learning as an important strategy for supporting the complex skills students need for further education and work in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The best way to improve schools is to organize teachers into collaborative teams that clarify what each student must learn (Hattie, 2009). These collaborative teams gather evidence and analyze the results so that they can learn which instructional strategies work and which do not (DuFour, 2009). That is, schools are urged to function as professional learning communities (PLCs).

Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved student achievement is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour et al., 2006). The subject of PLCs is not a new phenomenon in education (Owen, 2016). While the term PLC has gained attention and taken on new meaning, Dufour (2004) states PLCs are intended to help educators "work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all" and "create structures to promote a collaborative culture" (p. 6).

Rural school districts have their own unique issues in implementing PLCs. These issues stem from various factors, such as common planning time, the number of teachers per grade

level or subject area, and lack of professional development (PD) opportunities. The professional resources available to school districts that support PLC implementation in each school system are uneven (DuFour, 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2013), 25.4% of schools in the United States are in rural school systems and are made up of singletons (Hansen, 2015). Hansen defined "singletons" as a teacher, regardless of teaching assignment, who is the sole individual on a grade-level team or who is the sole specialty teacher. Perhaps only one may exist on a campus. Although rural schools face different circumstances, singletons can collaborate in PLC work via vertical teams or interdisciplinary teams as well as through other singletons who support virtual communities and structural change (Hansen, 2015).

This chapter provides an overview of the impact on school communities that administrator and teacher perceptions have on the implementation of and participation in PLCs. It begins by describing the specific problem that PLCs deal with regarding professional practice and the impact of PLCs on professional growth and student achievement. This chapter also addresses the problem that launched this rural school system study as well as the purpose of the study, research questions, and key terms.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers face challenges with school reform demands and stringent federal and state accountability mandates (DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Depending on the severity of the situation, district leaders seek improvement actions and campus restructuring plans to close the achievement gap and, at minimum, meet Texas Education Agency (TEA) passing standards.

Rural school districts face different circumstances (DeLuca et al., 2017). The multiple hats staff members must wear, and the district's rural size affect the implementation of a

traditional PLC model (Hord, 2009). Due to the location and resources of rural schools, the same opportunities for professional growth are not as readily available as they are for larger school systems (Steeg, 2016).

The school district in this study needs improvement across the board in the areas of English language arts (ELA), specifically reading and writing, per the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) scores (TEA, 2018). Since 2014, STAAR data either have indicated a decline or are stagnate in student achievement for both areas (TEA, 2018), and district leaders began acknowledging the decrease in student achievement and knew intervention was necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify teacher and administrator perceptions about PLC implementation for professional growth, increasing student achievement, as well as the effects of participation on improving instructional practices. The study focused on a rural public school district in West Texas (Turbine Independent School District [TISD], a pseudonym).

Previous extensive research demonstrated the positive impact and multiple growth elements that PLCs could provide to urban school systems (Brown, 2016; DeLuca et al., 2017; Steeg, 2016; Wells & Feum, 2012). However, a lack of available research exists for an applicable PLC model for rural school districts. Because of the vital role that PLCs play in teachers' professional development and students' academic growth, it is important to understand the perceptions that teachers and leadership within a rural school system have about the need for effective PLC implementation.

This qualitative case study included virtual interviews with rural school teachers and administrators at elementary, middle, and high school campuses. Participants were asked to share their views about PLC methods and the effects PLCs could have on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and instructional practices in their school district.

Research Questions

Since PLCs have been used as a tool for academic improvement and have grown in popularity and implementation since 2000 (Eaker & Keating, 2012), could the implementation of PLCs help this rural district? Would the administrative leaders and teaching staff be receptive to this type of professional practice? This study explored these questions. The following overarching research question guided this study:

RQ1: What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation of and participation in PLCs?

The study addressed the following sub-research questions:

- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on professional growth?
- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on increasing student achievement?
- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on improving instructional practices?

Definition of Key Terms

Accountability. State accountability in education is a set of procedures and practices that stipulate, for all school districts, how to measure increasing student achievement and growth and how to support improvement where needed (TEA, 2019). The state of Texas has statutes that

mandate a Texas public school accountability system, which the TEA has designed. The system rates school districts and evaluate campuses using an A-F model. The model focuses on student achievement and college, career, and military readiness, as well as on closing performance gaps (TEA, 2018).

Collaboration. The process that facilitates learning between all stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, where PD focuses on instructional practice and increasing student achievement, each member of a team is accountable (DuFour & DuFour, 2006).

Professional growth. A variety of specialized learning, formal education, or advanced PD intended to help administrators and educators improve their craft, skill set, and effectiveness within their role (Abbott, 2014).

Professional learning community (PLC). PLCs are a practice in which educators and leaders work collaboratively to learn together and direct their learning toward improving instructional practices and increasing student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016).

Rural school district. A rural district is one that has an enrollment of fewer than 300 students, or that has an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state as well as an enrollment growth rate of less than 20% over the previous five years (Texas Rural Schools Task Force, 2017).

Student achievement. Student achievement measures academic progress and improvement over a defined period of time (Abbott, 2014).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the practice of PLCs, which is common in the world of education. However, depending on a school district's size and the quality of the PD provided to leaders and teachers, PLC implementation, interpretation, and effectiveness vary.

TISD has not implemented a consistent and in-depth PLC model across its campuses. Therefore, a qualitative study that examines the need for PLCs in a rural school district and the perspectives of teachers and administrators would contribute to the research. Chapter 2 focuses on the literature to provide a deeper understanding of the research (Machi & McEvoy, 2016) about PLCs and to show why further research is needed. The literature focuses on specific components of PLCs, their background, characteristics, purpose, and models. The literature review also discusses how PLCs foster professional teacher growth and increase student achievement. Research focusing on rural school district PLCs also supported the purpose of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the need for PLCs in a rural school district according to the perceptions of teachers and administrators. According to DuFour et al. (2016), regardless of the size of a school district, participation in effective PLCs is a critical factor for teacher growth and increasing student success. The PLC movement developed as an educational practice to assist schools in meeting the needs of staff and students. Extensive research indicates that schools with PLCs increase expectations for student achievement, create a positive learning environment, improve teacher instructional practices, and narrow student achievement gaps (Childs-Bowen, 2007; Schmoker, 2005).

Machi and McEvoy (2016) stated that a "literature review synthesizes current knowledge pertaining to the research question" (p. 1). This literature review is a comprehensive examination of scholarly studies on PLCs that encompass research since the mid-1990s. The concept of PLCs is not a new one; however, new studies continue to bring forward research on the importance of PLCs.

I conducted an organized search of the literature using online databases, such as the Abilene Christian University's (ACU's) One Search, Google Scholar, and Mendeley. ProQuest, the Educational Resources Informational Center (ERIC), government documents, educational organizations were also used. Key terms such as *professional learning communities*, *rural schools*, *collaboration*, *professional development*, and *school reform* were used to locate pertinent information.

Background

School Reform

School reform is not a new trend in education because it has been around for quite some time. In the 1980s, the focus of school reform was regarding the need for an increase in student achievement (Vescio et al., 2008). This timeframe also encompassed the release of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* report released by the U.S. Department of Education. This report focused on the failures of the U.S. education system and the reforms needed at multiple levels for a turnaround to occur within the education system. It looked at state, school district, and campus-level reforms (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). The domino effect of this report caused many families to look into other options outside of public education, such as private, charter, religious-based, and Montessori education (Kastner, 2015). This powerful and collaborative focus on public education became known as the "excellence movement" (DuFour et al., 2008). DuFour et al. (2008) brought to light the increase of more than 300 state and national agencies that were investigating the condition of public education across the United States.

Progressing into the 1990s and 2000s, school reform became about standards-based education (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; NCLB, 2001). Within this timeframe, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became law in 2001. The NCLB put provisions in place to support underprivileged students. It supported school reform on the foundation that setting high expectations and establishing measurable goals could improve individual student outcomes (NCLB, 2001). Another significant school reform act was the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). It came to action in 2015. The ESSA contained provisions that were aimed at ensuring success for students and schools. It focused on America's disadvantaged and high-need student populations, college attainment, and career and military readiness. It required statewide assessments to measure student performance. The ESSA emphasized access to high-quality early

childhood education programs, increase graduation rates, and the support of low-performing schools (ESSA, 2015).

School reform is necessary when a school district is not experiencing an increase in student achievement (Harris et al., 2018). As a result, Texas designed and adopted education standards and an assessment system to determine if students were acquiring the grade-level knowledge reflected in the state education standards (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001).

School reformation is about overcoming challenges to improve student learning and increase student achievement (Kastner, 2015). DuFour and Fullan (2013) recognized that school leaders face a shift in the cultural transformation when school reform is needed for improvement. School reform efforts look at teachers and administrators to accomplish reform by participating in effective professional development and implementing processes within their practice, such as PLCs (Harris et al., 2018). School reform is not a practice that occurs only inthe United States. It is a practice put into play in multiple countries. Advocates of school reform include countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Each country has implemented school reform initiatives that had a central focus on collaboration within PLCs (Riveros, 2012).

School Reform Challenges. As these educational reform initiatives have progressed beyond the standards-based movement, standards-based systems are still present in our education system, and they are not meeting state accountability requirements (Deffenbaugh, 2011). Not meeting mandated requirements can come with consequences for low-performing schools. School reform requires coordinated efforts of administrators and teachers around a common mission and vision (Deffenbaugh, 2011). This type of work is not easy to achieve and requires collaboration. Dulaney et al. (2013) referred to Fullan's work, which suggested that school reform necessitates active participation from all members of the school system, continuously

"interacting, communicating, and aligning resources" to grow educational achievements (p. 33). School districts and campuses change as a result of various initiatives and practices; therefore, improvement requires these systems to study their current state and move forward by refining and rebuilding its processes and practices to move forward in the right direction (Dulaney et al., 2013).

School Reform Through PLCs. A key component mentioned in the research is the participation in PLCs. A leader can use PLCs to frame teacher learning in the context of educational reform (Riveros, 2012). An expert in PLCs, DuFour (2004) specified "powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systemic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (p. 6). The characteristics of an efficient PLC involve teachers working in teams, engaging in learning, asking deep questions about the content and curriculum, and putting it into practice within the classroom environment (DuFour et al., 2008).

Nationwide, teachers are working together in PLCs to produce change and innovation to transform instruction (Harris et al., 2018). Harris et al. (2018) contended "that through collective action, and collaborative agency teachers are, in fact, leading educational reform" (p. 1). PLCs support a change of impact on teaching practices in order to reach higher numbers of student success (Riveros, 2012). Riveros clarified that as school reform evolved, it became interchangeable with increasing student achievement. Instructional qualities of effective school reform practices through PLCs include high-quality instruction and learner-centered high-quality professional development that seeks to transform classroom teaching (Hoppey et al., 2018). PLCs are seen as a benefit of effective school reform.

Professional Learning Communities

The concept of PLCs began as early as the 1960s when it was characterized as "an alternative to the isolation endemic to the teaching profession" (Solution Tree, 2019, para. 1). It was not until the 1990s that DuFour and Eaker published *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Solution Tree, 2019). At the time, this book was "an important step in converting the PLC concept from a "secondary whisper to a major rallying cry" (Solution Tree, 2019, para. 8). With the growing interest in implementing PLC practices to address the need for improving student learning, it is necessary to review literature that reveals how PLCs impact teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practices.

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), teachers' professional practice improves when collaboration occurs versus working in a silo (Solution Tree, 2019). McLaughlin (1993) defined seven characteristics of effective schools with PLCs in place: (a) common norms and values, (b) collegiality, (c) collaborative teamwork, (d) purposeful reflection, (e) continuous learning of best practices, (f) professional growth, and (g) common expectations. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) researched over 1,200 schools and reported that teachers in the most successful schools worked toward a common goal and purpose and shared responsibility for student learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the theories of constructivism and distributed leadership. Hord (2009) identified supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive physical conditions, people capacities, and shared personal practices as the core attributes of an effective PLC. Since PLCs are based on the learning process of children as well as adults, the constructivist learning theory is a good basis for determining the needs of individuals involved with the PLC implementation process. Distributed leadership is also called

team leadership, shared leadership, or democratic leadership (Robert, 2019). The distributive leadership approach is based on the concept of shared leadership that is the core of PLCs.

Constructivist Learning Theory

PLCs provide a professional learning platform that brings teachers together to work toward improving their professional craft and increasing student achievement. Constructivist learning theory attempts to inform how individuals come to learn what they know (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Neutzling et al. (2019) relied on the works of past philosophers, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, for their view on constructivist theory regarding the fact that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. Constructivist learning theory supports the mindsets, interactions, and learning that take place within successful PLCs. A PLC is custom-made to address instructional teacher needs for differentiating classroom instruction to support and engage students from various backgrounds (Smith et al., 2009). The constructivist learning theory focuses on diverse student-centered instruction and learning methods, which differ from a traditional teaching model (McLeod, 2019).

Traditional Classroom Model. A traditional classroom model is one where information is passively disseminated from teacher to student, and students are simply recipients of the knowledge (McLeod, 2019). DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasized that the traditional teaching model may have been effective for schools when the set expectations were such that fewer students were expected to be educated at a higher level beyond high school. A traditional classroom model is what most think of as being “old school” (DuFour &Eaker, 1998; McLeod, 2019). The teacher is authoritative and directive, the student works alone, repetition is student engagement, and the environment is teacher-centered (McLeod, 2019). Time and changes due to law, statutes, and policies have raised the level of expectations and driven a need for reform

(Christiansen & Robey, 2015). The movement that came about to assist with school reform was the implementation of PLCs.

Constructivist Learning Environment. Constructivism is a theory of learning that allows the "learner meaningful, concrete experiences in which they can look for patterns, construct their own questions, and structure their own models, concepts, and strategies" (Yilmaz, 2008, p. 169). McLeod (2019) identified several characteristics of a constructivist classroom. These characteristics suggest that the teacher pursues students' questions and values students' interests, provides a setting for interactive learning that builds on what students already know, ensures the classroom is student-centered, establishes teacher dialogue with students, assists students with constructing their own meaning and engaging in active learning; and student work is not individual, but primarily in collaborative groups.

Researchers like Yilmaz (2008) and McLeod (2019), among others, transform these characteristics of a constructivist learning environment into instructional practices. Through these teacher instructional practices, students are able to engage in developing their cognitive thinking and higher-order thinking ability (Yilmaz, 2008). Ultimately, teachers redesign their pedagogy to fit the needs of their students. Teachers take into consideration the misconceptions students have developed of the content being taught, lack of background knowledge, the multiple modalities of individual student learning (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), and student responses to redesign and reteach material within a classroom founded on constructivist learning theory (McLeod, 2019; Yilmaz, 2008).

Constructivism for Adult Learning. Constructivism is a learning theory that focuses on inquiry-based active learning in which learners individually construct knowledge based on their past and present experiences (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). It is important to note that the

constructivist theory is applicable to adult learning also. Professional learning communities depend on the collaboration of faculty and administration to discover and "learn" the best plans of action to support learning for their students (Heath, 2017). This discovery is a learning process for them also. Sharing multiple perspectives is a key component of constructivism, as collaboration is essential and ignites conceptual growth (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). The main focus of constructivism for adults is to have learners engage in active learning rather than passive (Groves, 2008). This changes the role of the teacher to that of a facilitator, encouraging peer discussion and engaging in formative assessment, resulting in deeper learning. (Groves, 2008).

Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership (DL) is a key component that impacts change within a school. Robert (2019) alluded the multiple titles DL has, such as "team leadership, shared leadership or democratic leadership" (p. 1). Distributed leadership has multiple characteristics: (a) dispersed among multiple individuals and responsibilities are shared; (b) DL is not a position, rather a leadership practice quality in individuals across an organization; (c) and within a school system, leadership interacts with those in subordinate positions to ensure they are working toward set goals and expectations—teamwork (Robert, 2019). Bolden (2011) shared four myths about DL: (1) It requires a plan for administration; (2) It lessens the function of school leaders; (3) The viewpoint is that all staff are leaders; and (4) It is only about collaborative settings.

According to Baloglu (2012), DL is identified as a united effort in which individuals within a school gather resources, talents, and skills to create a collaborative unit that is more effective than the total of its weaker components. It supports change by focusing on the interactions of educators versus the sole actions of the school leader (McBrayer et al., 2018).

Administrative leadership is vital to surviving the obstacles associated with launching effective PLCs because of their ability to affect the system's culture and expectations (DeMatthews, 2014). PLCs are only as effective as the leaders who facilitate them. They require the participation of administrators at all levels (Schlichter, 2015). In education today, administrators spend most of their time on tasks that do not directly connect to student learning or improving instructional practices and do not spend the time needed to grow teachers (Yager & Yager, 2012).

Regardless of the difficulties schools face, PLCs are a formidable tool for inspiring teachers and creating systems that encourage leadership and professional growth (Stubblefield, 2019). Distributed leadership allows administrators to share leadership responsibilities with staff that have leadership qualities. When shared leadership occurs, this allows the campus leader to be available for the work that matters—instructional leadership. Ideally, PLCs are intended to grow teachers within their professional practice and, in turn, increase student achievement. Distributed leadership develops effective leaders within a school beyond campus leadership to understand their own learning and how it impacts those around them (Elmore, 2002). PLCs can be influential for school improvement but entail campus administrators and teachers to collaborate in learning (DeMatthews, 2014).

Professional Learning Communities

DuFour et al. (2010) defined PLCs as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in continual cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11). The work behind PLCs stems from best research-based practices (DuFour et al., 2005; Wells & Feum, 2012). PLCs began with the concept of learning organizations (Senge, 1990). According to DuFour et al. (2006) "the very essence of a

PLC is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student" (p. 3). In the 1980s, prior to DuFour's research, it was thought that teacher development could only be achieved through external learning outside of the work environment. As PLC research has evolved, it was discovered that learning occurs through embedded training on-the-job by collaborating with teammates and has become as important as outside professional development (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

DuFour et al. (2005) found that the implementation of a PLC requires constant work. This work involves collaborative professional growth among teachers and administrators. The implementation of PLCs is not faculty meetings filled with administrative topics, nor do they involve a learning program that can be purchased. Rather, the practice is a collaborative process where effective teaching improves student outcomes (DuFour, 2007). PLCs are goal-driven, meaningful, and require educators' professional commitment to learning and increasing their students' learning (Hord, 2009). Today, PLCs are in practice across the education spectrum, from K-12 to institutions of higher education.

PLCs create a culture that supports and motivates teachers despite barriers of implementation, such as a lack of resources, isolation, and time issues that tend to stop initiatives from happening (DuFour et al., 2008). Creating a PLC takes hard work and a cultural shift. This cultural shift is the creation of a comprehensive, collaborative environment. Dufour et al. (2008) stated, "A collaborative culture is created where teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team and their school" (p. 15). This collaborative effort must be continual, and results are not always seen immediately. Because of this, the sustainability of PLCs is difficult.

DuFour et al. (2010) developed three ideas as a roadmap to the success of PLCs: a) The focus should be on high levels of learning for all students versus what is taught; b) teachers should not work in silos, that is, PLC work must be collaborative with shared responsibility for learning; c) teachers must implement and follow-through by continuously gathering data using multiple methods to find evidence of student learning and instructional practice effectiveness (p. 14).

PLCs help teachers reflect on their best practices through collaboration, sharing ideas, lesson planning, and other instructional strategies (Bausmith & Barry, 2011). Bausmith and Barry (2011) found that PLCs are beneficial for teachers and increase the understanding of the content being taught and how students learn that content. However, the various approaches to PLCs across the education domain can be a disadvantage. If practices are not understood, then deep implementation does not occur, making it harder for leaders to execute PLC. By working together, educators can potentially create positive change in their professional learning and students' growth. A culture of positive change requires reflection, action orientation, and a focus on collaborative studies (DuFour et al., 2005).

The PLC model is designed for collaborative professional growth among teachers and administrators that leads to increasing student achievement and impacting instructional practice. Various PLC models can be utilized based on particular districts and campus needs (Wells & Feum, 2012). PLC models, such as those by Senge, have been developed, adopted, and modified to fit specific schools (Reis, 2015). One of the most popular implementation models occurs during educators' common planning time (Dever & Lash, 2013). When multiple teachers in the same grade level teach the same content areas, common conference periods can be arranged for

common grade-level planning. This is the most common model used (DuFour, 2004) and provides for a more user-friendly PLC schedule.

Other PLC models include individuals in secondary departments, campus committees, professional organizations, and entire school districts (DuFour, 2004). In a rural school system, a common planning time and secondary departments are not user-friendly because of the system's makeup; a rural school district may have only one teacher for an entire grade level. In the secondary rural sector, a teacher may be teaching multiple subjects, so there is no teachers' department.

Studies Related to the Impact of PLCs

An abundance of studies extols the impact of PLCs on multiple aspects of both teacher professionalism and student growth. Senge (1990) argued that while an organization has the capacity to learn, not all members within the system are conducive to learning. Pirtle and Tobia (2014) clearly outlined what makes a true PLC versus what often occurs when the meaning of PLC work is lost, and the word becomes misused. Key components of teacher commitment to active participation in PLCs come from reflection, professional and collaborative dialogue, refinement of instructional practices, and purposeful work toward increasing student learning (Cowan et al., 2012).

Understanding the following six aspects can assist campus administrators with effective PLC implementation. The first factor is clear structure and purpose, such as knowing the standards students are required to learn and the skills necessary to master teaching those standards through research-based instructional approaches, planning, applying, analyzing, and refining lessons and teaching around student work produced (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014). The second PLC implementation strategy is about schools tackling the most critical instructional needs to

increase student achievement. Collecting, using, and reflecting on data gathered fosters a clear purpose for PLC meetings and defines the priority work (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014). The third approach revolves around support from all levels within a district and campus system and the support given to teachers, including technology, multiple and varied resources, and access to internal and external instructional support that aligns with PLC goals and increases student achievement (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014).

Trust is the fourth vital component to sustaining PLCs and the depth of collaboration that teachers and leaders can experience within the PLC journey (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014). Another part of teacher growth, also known as the fifth aspect, is valuable feedback, such as learning walks in which teachers and school leaders observe how learning from PLCs carries over into classroom instruction (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014). Finally, the sixth component that fosters long-term PLCs is how a teacher receives affirmation and how much they feel valued; this, in turn, positively increases teacher self-efficacy and impacts a teacher's mental well-being and level of professionalism (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014).

High-functioning PLCs have a positive effect on both teacher professional practice and student success (Vescio et al., 2008). Vescio et al. (2008) found that the staple of PLC work is the idea of improving student learning by refining teacher practice and keeping the effort of the work student-centered. Teacher practice is composed of multiple things, such as how a teacher instructs students, works with colleagues to learn and refine teaching strategies, and uses student evidence to refine teacher practice through reflection and continued collaboration to improve student success. PLCs also influence the professional culture within a campus environment and can affect teacher mindsets and habits (Vescio et al., 2008).

All school systems deal with stringent accountability requirements, and PLCs have become a strategy to assist with increasing student academic performance. Research shows that when teachers work collaboratively toward meeting their students' needs and study evidence of student instructional attainment, then academic achievement increases (Vescio et al., 2008). The findings of Vescio et al. (2008) indicated how powerful PLCs could be for school reform.

Another term for PLC is "professional learning team" (PLT; Jackl & Lougée, 2012). Some school districts, like Wake County Public School System (WCPSS), use PLTs as a strategy for school reform and increasing academic stakes in improving state accountability, student achievement, increased graduation rates, and student college and career readiness (Jackl & Lougée, 2012). Jackl and Lougée (2012) studied several schools within the WCPSS and found that campuses with higher numbers of teachers actively participating and focused on student attainment within their PLT work had higher rates of student success. WCPSS strongly believed in the success of PLTs. They became the springboard from which the entire district dove into its mission and vision work, and thus was added to their school board policy (Jackl & Lougée, 2012). A PLT framework was also developed to address teacher actions and student impact over a four-year span.

Passi (2010) studied four dimensions of PLCs to examine how they were linked to levels of increased student achievement. The four dimensions, as defined by Passi, include concentrating on learning, collective vision, collaborative culture, and effective operational support. Since the focus of school systems is to educate all students, the first dimension encompasses refining the teacher's craft through reflection on instructional practice and student attainment of knowledge (Passi, 2010). Dimension two, collective vision, concerns commitment to the organization as a whole and the team a teacher collaborates with to improve student

learning (Passi, 2010). The third dimension, collaborative culture, is seen as a pillar for PLC success. It is about all participants working toward a common goal individually and collectively (Passi, 2010). Dimension four delves into the multiple layers of support that must be in place to facilitate an effective learning community, such as common planning time, teaching resources, team observations, and purposeful reflection time (Passi, 2010). Passi found that all dimensions needed to be in place for PLCs and to be a continuous part of PLC work. In addition, teachers and administrators collaborating and reflecting on common student assessments as well as common goal setting, is vital to effective PLC function (Passi, 2010).

Positive Reviews of PLCs

School districts from around the globe have participated in PLC practices, which have many supporters. Teacher PLCs have been renowned as highly effective in fostering teacher mindset and practices, such as building skills, reinvigorating the passion, and nurturing teacher well-being within the professional developments in a school environment (Owen, 2016). Meiers et al. (2009) stated that PLCs are effective because colleagues work together, continuously and consistently, by learning, experimenting, and sharing pedagogical practices.

In Hong Kong, Yin et al. (2019) examined the impact of PLCs on the connection between teacher trust and professional learning, focusing specifically on kindergarten teachers. They found that trust between teammates had a direct influence on teacher learning and that teacher learning impacted student learning and achievement. Student learning, therefore, was linked to a teacher's effectiveness to teach (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Aside from the positive impact of PLCs on student achievement, DuFour and DuFour (2010) believed PLCs are an essential condition for student success and added that educators

within a school need to collaboratively refine skills for success and best practices to help students acquire the necessary skills for an evolving society.

PLCs support teacher practices by increasing content knowledge, the ability to modify instructions, and loyalty to professional growth and change (Protheroe, 2004). Professionally re-energized teachers are more likely to inspire and motivate students toward success (Protheroe, 2004). Thus, teacher instructional practice cultivates collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility for students' development and success (Hord, 2009).

Hord (2009) suggested that teachers benefit as a result of participating in a PLC. They share accountability for student outcomes, have a stronger understanding of their role in supporting students, provide feedback to teammates, benefit from collaborating with colleagues, and gain a renewed sense of professionalism. In PLCs, teachers increase their collaboration with peers, focus on student learning, and continuously learn (Vescio et al., 2008).

Critical Reviews of PLCs

PLCs also have their critics. Smardon and Charteris (2017) referred to PLC work as "cruel optimism" and associate this viewpoint with optimism overload. When more is added to an educator's plate, they can view it positively or negatively, and whichever they choose affects the way they view and participate within a system's requirement, in this case, PLCs (Smardon & Charteris, 2016). In general, Smardon and Charteris feel that if PLCs are aimed at developing teachers' practice, that it should be done holistically and not via a system mandate.

Wells and Feum's (2012) research focused on the different approaches to PLC work between teachers and administrators. Models vary from school to school because of the level of understanding; this can be a negative factor (Eaker & Keating, 2012). After Eaker and Keating (2012) studied the White River School District in Washington state, one of the cautions given to

school districts and campuses was not to fall into “professional learning communities lite, simply doing enough to get by, picking and choosing the PLC practices they want to do or feel comfortable doing” (p. 53). It is important that PLC work follows key strategies laid out in the research so the model implemented is effective.

Some researchers believe that a PLC approach is not realistic for schools in distress that require intense intervention and improvement (Mintrop & Charles, 2017). Some school systems also confront circumstances that require a different type of faculty community to assist with challenges in the classroom (Mintrop & Charles, 2017).

PLCs are not easy programs to implement. According to Provini (2013), common reasons for PLC failure include the following:

1) insufficient access to timely data on which to base instructional decisions;
2) poor infrastructure (especially lack of scheduled time for teachers to meet or inefficient use of the limited time available);
3) lack of teacher buy-in for the process (perception that administrators imposed PLC implementation upon teachers);
4) lack of teacher ownership of the process (perception that administrators dictate what teachers do during their collaborative time); and
5) a school culture in which teachers tend to “compete” rather than collaborate. (p. 1)

A study conducted by Bolam et al. (2005) stated that obstacles in implementing PLCs include staff resistance to change, staff changes, leadership turnover, and central and local policies affecting resources and budgets,.

Professional Growth

PLCs depend heavily on professional development. Professional development (PD) includes two critical areas of focus. The first one is the type of PD teachers acquire from an outside entity, and the second one is what they learn from within the school system (Martin, 2008). Martin used her background in leadership, experience with professional development, and working with school districts seeking improvement to provide research-based information on the positive impact of PD on teacher growth. Teachers come from various backgrounds and have different depths of knowledge within their craft. Martin (2008) recommended that teachers set goals, that leaders know teachers' strengths, and that teachers and administrators pull from in-house experts for team learning. Sparks (2005) believed that "learning has a strong social component and because synergy that comes from group problem solving often leads to innovative solutions, the most powerful forms of PD are centered on teams within schools" (p. 91).

The education field is evolving. Educators should prepare students for life beyond high school while also educating them to master the required skills for accountability. Therefore, lifelong learner educators should keep up with best-practice PD to remain effective within their work (Martin, 2008). Darling-Hammond (1996) studied ways to develop teachers into a strong teaching power through initial teacher preparation, professional development, active teacher research, collaboration, and goal setting. This study looked at how other systems support teachers and promote professional learning. Darling-Hammond found that systems from other countries allowed teachers to have more decision-making authority, receive higher pay, and gain support in their professional growth (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

Teacher empowerment for professional growth is vital to PLC success. The research of Doolittle et al. (2008) supported circumstances within school systems that can positively impact teacher development and achievement. Their study of two elementary schools and one high school focused on teacher partnerships for learning. The emphasis of the work was on the work environment, teacher learning, and school culture (Doolittle et al., 2008). The team assisted campuses by designing a series of PD sessions that focused on curriculum and instruction and that paid teachers to participate (Doolittle et al., 2008). Teachers interacted and engaged with their learning and peers around issues and best practices in teaching (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). The knowledge transferred into classroom practices resulted in a deeper understanding of curriculum and increased student achievement.

Through PLCs, principals, teachers, and students become empowered with tools, each with a purpose and benefit to the PLC environment. Teachers learn from one another and build knowledge to bring into classroom instructional practice (Wood, 2007). Each PLC member collaborates with other members to expand their knowledge base and ultimately improve their practice (DuFour, 2004). PLCs function as environments that are designed for members to engage in transformation (Servage, 2008).

Transformation is a journey that takes place over time when a change occurs regarding how an individual identifies with a particular topic or situation (Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010). Since teachers have instrumental contact with students, developing teachers' skill sets through professional learning is essential to student learning (Easton, 2011). Staff who participated in PLCs provided learning objectives that were intellectually more challenging for their students, leading to higher student achievement (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Student Achievement

When PLCs are executed appropriately, they can fine-tune teaching practices and impact student learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). A high-stakes advantage for implementing effective PLCs is student growth, where, through PLCs, teachers observe one another's teaching, collaborate on practices, and study student work produced to increase student achievement (Fullan, 2007). Vescio et al. (2008) found that under the right conditions, PLC work leads to better student performance.

A few influences impact student achievement (Marzano, 2003). The first influence focuses on curriculum, one that is "guaranteed and viable" and allows for appropriate pacing for learning (Marzano, 2003, p. 52). The second one is goal setting, stemming from formative assessment data. Transparency and clear communication are the third key stimuli in Marzano's work. One of the vital influences is a campus culture that promotes collaboration and professionalism among school staff with shared leadership practices (Marzano, 2003). Thus, a major reason PLCs make a difference in student achievement is persistent attention given to meet the needs of students (Vescio et al., 2008).

Because of a state- and district-mandated accountability-based system that a teacher cannot control, student growth needs to be measured across multiple modalities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). With the mounting concern for student accountability comes an increased need for reassurance that initiatives such as PLCs have a direct association with increased student achievement. Thus, it is not only important to substantiate the success of teacher collaboration, but there must also be proof that teamwork is improving instructional practice and student achievement. Darling-Hammond et al. (2014) found that campuses that focus on student achievement uphold high-return practices. These practices include designing

their curriculum or using a research-based curriculum, refining instruction methods, and developing varied assessments, with the goal of engaging students and assisting them in developing critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills. Research indicates that a school system that meets the characteristics of PLCs, and practices them with fidelity, will achieve higher levels of student achievement (Sagor, 2010).

DuFour (2008) communicated the importance of PLCs and how they support educators to impact student achievement. PLCs provide time for teachers to come together to work and reflect on the critical instruction they give to students to increase academic success (DuFour, 2015). PLCs should be created with the goal of continuous teacher learning for the improvement of instructional practices and increased student achievement (Hord, 2009). The literature advocates that student achievement is primarily linked to the instructional strength of the institution.

Hattie (2009) synthesized 800 meta-analyses connected to achievement in students. Hattie argued that when teaching and learning are evident by both the teacher and student, genuine learning occurs and increases student achievement. The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance researched how student achievement was impacted by teacher professional learning. The study was conducted in New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. More than 1,300 studies were used to address the effect of teacher learning on student growth (Yoon et al., 2007). Their research found that educators who participated in high levels of PD, with an average of 49 hours per year, boosted their students' academic achievement by 21 percentile points (Yoon et al., 2007).

Rural School Districts

With the popularity of PLCs, the question of effectiveness needs to be addressed, especially in rural schools. Rural school systems are unique in makeup. According to archives

from the U.S. Department of Education (DoEd) through data gathered by the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, a rural system is one that is not defined as urban and consists of a population of fewer than 2,500 people.

Rural students account for about a third of all students in America, and nearly half of all students globally live in nonurban zones (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Rural school districts are much smaller than urban school districts. An advantage of this setup is the teacher-to-student ratio, as rural school systems commonly have smaller class sizes. This allows teachers to dive deeper and make stronger connections with students and to assist them when needed. Because rural school districts have less funding, creativity for employee retention comes into play (Walden, 2015). Rural school districts focus on the human side of their employees, their relationships, and creating a sense of belonging (Parsley & Barton, 2015).

Rural students in the United States are at a disadvantage when it comes to student achievement, school involvement, and community involvement compared to their inner-city counterparts (Walden, 2015). Several rural school districts also face challenges providing high-quality education, and one with multiple options, because of limited funding (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Parsley and Barton pointed out that it is highly likely that rural school districts cannot compete for salary when compared to their city counterparts, so turnover rates are usually high, which also makes it challenging to sustain PLCs. The challenges intensify disadvantages that leaders face related to recruitment, retention, and faculty training, delaying or preventing the implementation of effective PLCs (Parsley & Barton, 2015).

Hallinger and Liu (2016) also supported similar findings of inequity in China, with less funding provided to rural schools in comparison to urban schools; the lack of funding made it challenging to meet teacher and student needs. Rural schools in China display gaps associated

with learning, including learning-centered leadership and teacher learning (Hallinger & Liu, 2016).

Texas has several rural school districts. The 2013–2014 data from the NCES stated that Texas had at that time more than 2,100 schools in rural areas (NCES, 2014). The NCES converts this to approximately 20% of Texas schools being in rural areas, more than any other state. Rural districts in Texas face challenges in education with teacher recruitment/retention, career and technical education support, funding, and PD support (Texas Rural Schools Taskforce, 2017). To address these problems, the TEA created the Texas Rural Schools Task Force in 2016 to identify specific challenges and best practices for rural districts statewide (Texas Rural Schools Task Force, 2017).

Turbine Independent School District (Pseudonym)

TISD has varied student achievement levels. The areas of most need are reading, writing, and math. Specifically, TISD also needs to improve performance within the special education and English learner subgroups (Martinez, 2017). The TISD utilizes performance assessments throughout each grading period and ends each reporting period with a unit or project-based assessment. The assessment is written to meet the standards within the grading period time frame. All grade level students participate in grade-appropriate formative and summative assessments for all subject areas. State-assessed subject areas also use test-style formatted questions. Elective courses use project-based assessments for their summative assessment at the end of a grading period.

According to TISD district-level and campus-level leadership, PLCs are currently whole-group staff meetings. In 2017, at the TISD administrative team summit, leaders try to embed learning; however, the reality is that PLC meetings focus more on administrative content than

professional growth. Minimal to no before- or after-school meetings take place because the teachers wear multiple hats, such as being coaches, extracurricular sponsors, or bus drivers. For many years, this has been the cultural norm. This setup creates challenges for a rural school system. Because of these factors, the perceptions of teachers and leaders impact PLC implementation and effectiveness.

Summary and Preview of Chapter 3

In summary, Chapter 2 provided an overview of the literature on various challenges educators and school systems face that could be improved through PLC work. Part of being an educator is to learn highly effective and high-yield teaching strategies for self-growth and to increase student achievement (Hattie, 2009). This qualitative study of rural school district teachers' and administrators' perspectives on PLCs provides research for rural school systems in determining the need for PLC implementation, even when dealing with being rural in makeup. Information about PD and its impact on teacher growth and its effect on student achievement was given. In general, Hattie (2009) states that teachers and administrators strive to set and reach goals that focus on what education should be: "Education is more than teaching people to think—it is also teaching people things that are worth learning" (p. 27).

Chapter 3 provides the research design, methodological approach, population information, and qualitative sample details for collecting data to support this study. The key tool for data gathering was from interviews. Chapter 3 also lays out the interview protocols for the study. Furthermore, an analysis of the data, methods for establishing trustworthiness, details about my role, and ethical considerations are provided. The conclusion of Chapter 3 addresses assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

Rural school districts deal with different dynamics that affect the traditional PLC models designed to fit the needs of urban school systems. Because of this, qualitative research was chosen for this study to understand how rural school teachers and administrators perceive and respond to PLCs in their real-world setting. This qualitative single case study examined the perspectives of West Texas rural school district teachers and administrators in regards to implementing PLC for professional growth, increasing student achievement, and learning how PLCs affect instructional practices.

The following overarching research question guided this study: "What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation of and participation in PLCs?" The study will address the following research questions:

- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on professional growth?
- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on increasing student achievement?
- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on instructional practices?

The research questions were designed to gather input from rural school teachers and administrators.

This chapter includes the research design and method that I used in the study. It discusses the population, the sample population, materials and instruments, and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. It also reviews the methods for trustworthiness, my role as a researcher,

ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. It ends with a summary of the chapter.

Research Design and Method

In their research, Saldana and Omasta (2018) detailed vital analytic components of qualitative research: (a) abridging large quantities of data, (b) identifying patterns in written and visual materials, (c) amalgamating seemingly different things, (d) understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction, and (e) interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life. The components of qualitative research are "generally characterized by inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning and is generally appropriate when your primary purpose is to explore, describe, or explain" (Leavy, 2017, p. 9). I chose qualitative research for this study with the intent to understand how subjects, in this case, rural school teachers and administrators, perceive and respond to PLCs in their natural environment.

I chose to conduct a single case study as the inquiry design. Stake (1995) stated that a qualitative case study is a "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). Stake contributed the following definition of case studies:

> Case studies are universal in nature via the inter-relationship between the phenomenon and its contexts being empirical. It is based on observations in the field of study, and it is interpretive based on the researcher-subject interaction and emphatic because of the reflective perspective of the researcher and subjects. (p. 237)

The case study was an appropriate strategy for this research because this type of qualitative data collection allowed me to explore how teachers and administrators felt about PLCs and the feasibility of implementing them in a rural school district.

According to Creswell (2014), "a hallmark of a good quality case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case" (p. 98). Establishing an in-depth understanding requires the use of multiple data sources. This study utilized individual virtual interviews as well as virtual focus group interviews. The study also used a survey to gain information that refined and help design the comprehensive interview protocols.

To add diversity to the study, focus group interviews were held with rural school teachers from each campus (elementary, middle, and high school). The intent was to collect feedback from at least six teachers in each location. Virtual one-on-one interviews were held with administrators for the district. Prior to the interviews, I provided a survey that assessed the knowledge school district personnel have on PLCs. This survey served as a foundation for the interviews.

Once IRB approval was granted, the study began with an initial communication with the superintendent of TISD. Once approval to conduct the study was given by the district, I contacted campus administrators from each school to discuss the study and the research protocol. I communicated with the teachers via GoToMeeting to discuss the study and prepare them for the upcoming email, inviting them to participate in the qualitative study.

Teacher and administrator participation was voluntary. Once volunteers were selected, each was sent a letter communicating the details of their participation in the qualitative case study. The case study protocol was as follows:

- Administer surveys to focus group teacher participants and administrators to assess

their knowledge base of PLCs.

- Conduct one-on-one interviews with rural school administrators via GoToMeeting.
- Conduct focus group interviews with teachers from each campus via GoToMeeting.
- Use Scribie for transcription.
- Manually analyze data from transcripts and audio files of interviews.
- Code one-on-one and focus group interview transcripts.
- Identify categories.
- Identify themes.
- Interpret findings in relation to research questions.
- Review findings and analyze information for accuracy.
- Present findings.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify teacher and administrator perceptions about PLC implementation for professional growth, increase student achievement, and identify the effects of participation on instructional practices. I chose a qualitative design with a case study approach because it analyzes a specific project. The project was to analyze the implementation of PLCs in a rural community. A case study may be a community, a relationship, a decision process, or a specific project (Yin, 2011). This approach allowed me to examine a single case through the in-depth views of teachers and administrators.

Population

The setting of this study was a rural school district located in West Texas. TISD has a population of approximately 760 students and three campuses. Because of the size and student count of the high school, it is classified as a 2A school, meaning TISD high school is in division 2A for athletic and academic UIL competitions. The 2A division is just a step up from 1A, which

is less than 105 students. The leadership structure is compact, with two district-level administrators. TISD also has a business manager, three campus principals, and three supportive counselors. The elementary school houses pre-kindergarten through fourth grade. The middle school serves fifth through eighth grades. The high school has a traditional campus setup, providing instruction for students in the ninth through 12th grades. The district staff has a total of 111 employees, including a maintenance team, and 77 Texas-certified classroom teachers. The two predominant races within the community are White (51%) and Hispanic (42%); all other races make up the remaining 7% (TEA, 2018).

Sample Population

Once I obtained approval from the school district, I pursued teacher and administrator participation. In this case study, I purposefully collected data from rural school district classroom teachers and campus administrators that volunteered for the study. The study used purposeful sampling, which Yin (2011) defined as the "selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions" (p. 311). Saldana and Omasta (2018) described purposeful sample participants as being "deliberately selected because they are most likely to provide insight into the phenomenon being investigated due to their position, experience, and/or identity markers" (p. 96).

In order to gather sufficient data, I conducted teacher focus groups. Each focus group contained six participants. I purposefully selected 18 teacher participants from the three different TISD campuses (elementary, middle, and high school). This population consisted of veteran and novice teachers. The next phase in the data collection was one-on-one virtual interviews. Three campus principals and one district-level administrator participated. These participants

volunteered for the interviews. I conducted all the focus group and individual interviews virtually due to the restriction of face-to-face interviews due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

Instruments

Multiple sources of data were used in this case study. Creswell (2014) indicated, "the data collection in case study research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials" (p. 100). This study utilized an informational survey administered prior to the interview process. I used the surveys to help refine interview protocols and used the interview protocols to guide the focus group and individual interviews.

Informational Survey

I administered an informational survey (Appendix C) prior to the individual and focus group interviews. The purpose of this survey was to gather data about the participants' level of understanding of professional learning communities. This survey was administered to all the participants in the qualitative study. The survey asked the participants if they had any desire to be a part of a learning community in their school. This simple four question survey gave me the information I needed to refine the interview protocols and help me determine the depth of my interview sub-questions.

Interview Guides

This study utilized individual interviews and focus group interviews virtually via the GoToMeeting platform. The central focus of both interview protocols was derived from the research questions. The interview protocol had three sections: professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practice. These sections were the catalyst for answering the

overarching research question: What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation of and participation in PLCs?

Individual Interviews. I conducted individual interviews with the three campus principals at TISD. These interviews gathered participants' perspectives on implementing PLCs as well as the effects PLCs have on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and instructional practices. The interview guide (Appendix D) consisted of 11 questions that I created to help answer the study's research questions. The interviews were semistructured. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) recommended semistructured interviews that follow a clear set of instructions for interviewers that guide the interview, stemming from the research questions that the interviewer follows while interviewing. With semistructured interview guidelines, I could also deviate from the guide while staying on the topic, if deemed appropriate (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place virtually via the GoToMeeting platform. Each interview was recorded.

Focus Group Interviews. Focus group discussion is sometimes seen as synonymous with interviews, especially the semistructured one-to-one and group interviews (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Similarities between these techniques relate to the tendency to uncover people's perceptions and values (Hargreaves, 1967; Sewell, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). The focus groups consisted of three separate groups. There was a focus group from each campus at TISD (elementary, middle, and high school). The interview guide (Appendix E) had three major questions that covered the research areas of the effects of PLCs on professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. Using interviews with focus group participants provided opportunities for relevant notes, documentation, and individual/group feedback. I held focus group interviews virtually via GoToMeeting and recorded them on a digital device to assist

with transcription. The focus group interview was scheduled for 45 minutes, but I had flexibility according to the dynamics of the groups.

Data Collection

I performed a pilot study on both interview protocols. Harding (2013) stated that it is distinctly helpful to pilot the interview questions and adjust the interview guide accordingly before embarking on a major study. It can help identify if there are flaws or limitations within the interview design that allow necessary modifications to the major study (Kvale, 2007). I solicited a nonparticipating panel of administrators from TISD to pilot the individual protocol and a small panel of nonparticipating teachers to pilot the focus group protocol. During these discussions, I took note of all the pilot study participants' concerns and adjusted the protocols as necessary.

Participants were recruited from the district's elementary, middle, and high school. I communicated information about the study via email with district teachers and administrators at each campus and asked for volunteers to participate in the study. Once I received the responses for voluntary participation, I emailed the participants an informational survey. This survey gave me the knowledge I needed to conduct the interviews and refine the interview protocols. Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form for the study. After obtaining signatures, a date and time were set up for the focus groups and one-on-one interviews. For teachers, focus group interviews took place at a convenient time for them. All interviews were conducted virtually.

I gave each participant background information regarding the characteristics of and research about PLCs. The purpose of this was to make sure contributors understood the concept being studied. I began the interview session with a brief explanation of the research. Participants had an opportunity to ask questions about the PLC information that they were given prior to the

interview session. They were able to submit questions via email communication or contact me via phone or GoToMeeting prior to the interview. The interviews averaged about 50 minutes. Interviews were guided by the overarching and supporting open-ended interview questions. Prior to the session ending, I reviewed the responses to the interview questions to ensure they were captured accurately.

Once the interviews were over, I asked the participants to verify their answers by looking at my notes. This is a form of member checking. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016). Their interview responses were returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences. This process helped with the study's trustworthiness and validity.

Data Analysis

I used the framework method to analyze the data. The framework method has been used to identify commonalities and differences between participants' perceptions in qualitative research (Gale et al., 2013). This method of analyzing data has been used within the medical and health research fields. The researchers who developed the method created a seven-step process for comparing data and generating themes. As researchers go through the data collection and analysis process, they participate in transcription, becoming familiar with the interviews, coding, developing an analytical framework, applying the analytical framework, charting the data using a framework matrix, and interpreting the data collected (Gale et al., 2013). Gale et al. ascertained that this process produces "highly structured outputs" of abridged information. The framework method is also an inductive approach that allows the researcher to identify relationships as the analytical framework is constructed (Gale et al., 2013).

The survey was given to a pilot study panel for refinement. Then the final survey was provided to all study participants. After administering the informational survey to the study's participants, I used the data to refine the interview protocols. I also gave the interview protocols to a field study panel. The feedback from this panel and the information survey assisted in refining and finalizing interview protocols. Once I refined the interview guides, I conducted the interviews with both individual and focus groups. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data analysis started at this point.

Qualitative comparative analysis can be used for data collected from feedback and transcripts (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Leech and Onwuegbuzie suggested examining the data by defining codes and then developing themes from the codes. I analyzed the qualitative data using a matrix that displayed the focus groups and the one-on-one interview participants' responses. The matrix reflected my notes identifying categories and different themes identified by the data collected, along with my notes on participant's comments. The data matrix allowed me to make connections between the participants and focus group feedback and categories to develop themes. These themes offer an explanation for what is occurring within the data collected (Gale et al., 2013).

According to Braun and Clarke (2005), thematic analysis is the process of recognizing, examining, and reporting themes within data. Themes assist the researcher by supporting reflection of the dissertation work in reviewing headings and subheadings within the review of the literature process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The goal was deriving emergent codes and themes that add to the current research available on PLCs within rural school districts. An opportunity for further reflection and additional responses to the in-person interviews was given through an asynchronous method, such as email.

Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness

Credibility is a vital component of any research work (Shenton, 2004). I ensured that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were evident within the qualitative case study (Schwandt et al., 2007). To avoid bias, participation was voluntary and consisted of participants with varying levels of teaching and administration experience. I told the participants that if they felt more comfortable, that I would ask someone else to conduct their interview. I also told the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

A qualitative researcher determines the rigor of the inquiry by implementing certain credibility strategies, such as prolonged and varied field experience, time sampling, field journaling, triangulation, member inspection, peer analysis, interview procedure, establishing influence as a researcher, and structural soundness (Anney, 2015 p. 277). I triangulated data collected from the informational survey and both individual and focus group interviews to determine validity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) believed the strategy of triangulation is one of the most effective methods to determine the validity and reliability of a qualitative study. I provided the data collected during interviews with the respondents for their review to check for missing information or misinterpretation of the data gathered. I answered any of the respondents' questions and concerns.

Triangulation gives each participant a continuous and consistent voice throughout the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The detail I collected and shared allowed others to replicate the work, hence achieving transferability (Anney, 2015). I included notes within the data to explain the attitudes and behavior of those being interviewed and support all findings through the data collection to show the dependability of the research. It is important to understand that if a different party came to the district to research the same topic, the findings would be similar

(Shenton, 2004). The use of reflection and triangulation during the analysis phase of the process assisted in obtaining confirmability. The intent was to ensure that participant data drove the information, not my preferences.

Researcher's Role

I am currently a district-level leader within a rural school district in Texas. Being a district-level leader for a rural school system places multiple roles and responsibilities under my leadership. One of the many hats I wear is working with professional development, which PLCs fall under. I maintained positive and clear communication about the purpose of the study and provided multiple opportunities for participants to seek answers to their questions.

I shared some of the research on implementing learning communities for teacher growth, increasing student achievement, and using PLCs to measure student growth. I shared the advantages and challenges that rural school districts have with student achievement and the need for PLCs. Finally, I provided an overview of student achievement levels for TISD, how success is measured, and what current PLCs look like at TISD. I shared the completed report about the data collected with the school district's teachers and administrators.

Ethical Considerations

Before I collected any data for this study, I obtained the proper approval from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) of Abilene Christian University (ACU). A participant consent form asking for voluntary permission to partake in the study also restated the study's information. Creswell (2014) expressed that "the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the informant(s)" (p. 198). I participated in ethics training through ACU, and I protected the rights and welfare of the human subjects as mandated by the ethical criteria of research on human subjects.

I followed and adhered to all ethical standards throughout the data collection and processing stages. All data collected were stored in a lockable cabinet for security purposes. Electronic documents were kept on a password-protected computer and device. Study data collected was shared with participants in the form of a summary memo, and all summary memos were shared with district and campus leadership. Individual participant results and any information identifying a participant were not shared.

Assumptions

Students from this rural school system have generally performed well on state assessments. The assumption that PLCs create an impact in increasing teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practice may be weak within certain pockets of the rural school district. The assumption is that participants were honest with their responses to the research questions. I asked follow-up questions when deemed appropriate to ensure clarity for myself and the respondent. Other assumptions were addressed once I conducted the research.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a research study. These limitations are out of the researchers' control (Gay et al., 2009). A limitation occurs when the researcher cannot control a facet of the study but believes that there might be a negative effect as a result (Gay et al., 2009). A potential limitation of this research design was the status of the researcher as a leader in the school district being studied.

It was important to note the potential for participants to feel obligated or pressured to participate or respond in a certain way. This was avoided by volunteering for the study or choosing not to participate in the study. Saturation could possibly be skewed if teacher and

administrator mindsets contained a cultural belief that what was already being implemented in the school was enough for teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practices.

Delimitations

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope as well as define the boundaries of a study (Simon, 2011). I had control over the delimitations in this research study. A delimitation was the selection of the school district where the data were collected. The rural school district that was the site for data collection shared similarities of demographics within the region, which helped to allow for generalizations. The results of this study could be generalized to Texas rural school districts. This study took place in a traditional rural school and did not include urban, charter, or private educational institutions.

Conclusion and Preview of Chapter 4

This chapter explained the research design and method the qualitative study followed. A narrative of the population, participants, materials, and instruments, and qualitative data collection and analysis protocols were described in detail. Ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were also given. Chapter 4 focuses on conducting the research and analyzing the evidence collected as well as interpreting the findings of the case study.

Chapter 4: Results

This study aimed to examine the perspectives of rural school district administrators and teachers concerning PLC implementation and participation and the effects PLCs have on professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. The main goal was to provide insight into a rural school system's PLC practices from critical stakeholders so other rural school systems could use the research to better understand the impact and challenges of implementing and participating in PLCs. Qualitative data were from rural school district administrators and teachers to ensure sufficient exploration of PLC perspectives within each participant's environment.

The study setting is significant to this qualitative research due to the district's size, which is rural. I conducted surveys, focus groups, and open-ended interviews to assemble the data. The administrators who I interviewed in one-on-one interviews had varying degrees of leadership experience. Three focus groups consisted of a mix of novice and experienced teachers and involved 18 participants.

A qualitative single case study was used in this study. Once I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the data for meaning, specific themes emerged from the overarching and sub-research questions. The following overarching research question guided this study: What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation of and participation in PLCs? The study also addressed the following sub-research questions: a) What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on professional growth? b) What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on increasing student achievement? c) What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on improving instructional practices?

This chapter includes a summary of research focus and processes, feedback from the pilot study, one-on-one and focus group interview findings, analysis and findings of interview data, emerging themes, and a summary of how the data answers the overarching question and sub-research questions.

Summary of Research Focus and Processes

After receiving ACU IRB approval (Appendix A), I began gathering information for the study's population. After receiving the school superintendent's consent to conduct the study (Appendix B), I sought out input from possible pilot study participants (nonparticipants in the study). Pilot study contributors had varying levels of experience in district-level curricula and leadership. The participants reviewed the survey and interview questions and provided feedback to refine and validate the study instruments before the implementation process. When participants completed and returned the survey, I analyzed the surveys and then modified and adjusted the interview protocols (Appendix D & E) with the gained knowledge that enhanced the protocols. After validation was secured, I obtained a list of TISD administrators and teachers to recruit for the study.

I sent all teachers and administrators an email with background information about the study and asked for voluntary research participants. When four administrators and 18 teachers indicated an interest in participating, I emailed them the consent form. The number of volunteers consisted of four one-on-one administrator interviews and formed three focus groups, one group from each campus (elementary, middle, and high schools). As participants signed and returned the consent form, I emailed the PLC Survey (Appendix C) to establish the baseline data.

Teacher focus group and administrator interview participants were able to select an interview day and time according to their availability. The interviews were scheduled with

GoToMeeting. I conducted three teacher focus group interviews and four administrator one-on-one interviews. All interviews were video- and audio-recorded. Interviews averaged 50 minutes in length and followed the semistructured interview protocol. The interviews were transcribed using Scribie. The data collection and analysis included the following steps:

1) Each interview was video and audio recorded using GoToMeeting.
2) Interviews were transcribed using Scribie.
3) Transcripts were reviewed for correctness. I read each focus group and one-on-one interview transcription while listening to the audio recording to ensure accuracy. I listened to each interview's audio recordings while simultaneously reading and editing each transcription to ensure accuracy.
4) Data were coded using NVivo and manually. NVivo identified the most common keywords and phrases directly from the participant's dialogue. I notated the most commonly used words. I used coding to help identify patterns within all the focus groups and administrator interviews.
5) Data were charted into a coding matrix (Appendix F). I created a matrix with focus-group and administrator responses to combine the NVivo codes and created categories.
6) I color-coded the data based on reoccurring words and phrases. I was able to group NVivo codes into ten categories combined for focus group teachers and administrator interviews.
7) These categories generated connections that merged into three themes for rural school teachers and administrators (Appendix F).
8) Data interpretation occurred. Codes and categories helped determine the themes.

Presentation of Findings

This qualitative study explored rural school teacher and administrator perceptions concerning implementing and participating in PLCs. I first conducted qualitative research using a pilot study group. The pilot study group gave feedback, which helped determine the validity and reliability of the instruments. Upon analysis of the feedback collected, I made modifications to the survey and interview protocols used in the study. After adjustments were made, I conducted the survey and semistructured interviews.

Instrument Validation

The purpose of the pilot study was to aid in the validation of the survey and interview questions. Four pilot study participants voluntarily assisted with the study. Pilot study members were not participants of the study. These members currently work within education and have experience as both teachers and leaders within various size school systems. Pilot study members had a combined experience of 92 years in education.

I emailed the survey and interview protocols to the pilot study participants and explained the origin of the questions. Each pilot member analyzed survey and interview protocol questions for content, accuracy, and effectiveness. After coordinating schedules, I scheduled a phone call to collect their input and thoughts on the survey and interview questions. The pilot group had minimal suggestions for improvement. One participant proposed that an inquiry about PLC background knowledge, addressing professional learning for teachers and administrators, be made. Another pilot participant suggested for examples to be given to participants about how PLCs made them feel. One of the pilot participants recommended the rewording of a question to state: “How do you convey the importance of professionalism to teachers?” for the administrator interview protocol. One other participant questioned the level of knowledge teachers hold about

the role they play in PLCs. Overall, the group recommended that I slightly alter my questions, as needed, to encourage more elaboration with responses during the semistructured interviews.

Survey Findings

The purpose of the survey was to gain a deeper perspective on the background, professional development, and the knowledge volunteers in the study had about the research questions. The survey information allowed me to understand the various levels of experience among administrators and teacher participants within the field of PLCs. Survey question responses provided me with an indicator of how to guide the semistructured interview questions for one-on-one administrator and teacher focus group participants.

Administrator Survey. A survey was given to the administrator participants prior to the interviews. Administrators varied slightly in experience and training with PLCs. The first question inquired about the level of knowledge about PLC experience, from no experience, represented by a score of 0, to a high-level of experience represented by a score of 5. Seventy-five percent of administrators felt they were at a level of 80% with knowledge about PLCs, equivalent to a score of 4, which indicated a higher level of knowledge base than not. Twenty-five percent of administrators felt they were at a 60% level, which fell in the middle between a range score of 0 and 5.

The second question examined the level of training regarding PLCs, from no training on PLCs denoted by a score of 0 to a high level of training about PLCs represented by 5. Seventy-five percent of administrators felt their training level was at 80% at a score of 4, which revealed a somewhat higher level of training about PLCs than not. Twenty-five percent of administrators felt they were at a 60% level, which was equivalent to a score of 3. Sixty percent fell between 0, indicative of no training, and a score of 5, which represented a high level of training.

The third question consisted of three parts. Administrators were to rate their level of understanding with the effects PLCs have on professional growth, increased student achievement, and improvement in instructional practices from a level of no understanding designated by a score of 1, to a high-level of understanding indicated by a score of 5, for each component. The preponderance of administrators' feedback showed a high level of understanding of the effects PLCs have on professional growth, increased student achievement, and instructional practices improvement. All three components were scored the same by all participants. Seventy-five percent felt they had a somewhat high level of understanding specified by a score of 4, professional growth, increased student achievement, and improvement in instructional practices. Twenty-five percent of administrators selected a score of 5 for all three elements, signifying that at least one administrator felt they had the highest level of understanding, at a score of 5, for professional growth, increased student achievement, and improvement instructional practices.

The fourth question consisted of four parts. Leaders were to rate their level of experience from a negative experience, represented by a score of 1 = PLCs being unproductive, not task-oriented, not collaborative, and work not applying to the profession, up to a score of 5, indicative of a highly positive experience with PLCs being productive, task-oriented, collaborative, and work applying to the profession. Administrators also indicated that the work completed within PLCs is tied to the profession. Per the survey results, among administrators, there is a consensus that PLCs are productive and task-oriented. Seventy-five percent of administrators felt that PLCs were at a score of 3, in the middle, for being productive and task-oriented. Twenty-five percent scored PLCs' attributes as being productive and task-oriented at a slightly higher score of 4. All administrators felt 80% of the time, PLCs consisted of a positive collaborative experience. The

final part of Question 4 was about work in PLCs applying to the profession. Fifty percent of administrators fell right in the middle at a score range of 3. Twenty-five percent fell under the score of 4, and the other 25% were at a score of 5. Under the 25% category, administrators, represented by a score of 5, rated themselves with the highest score, which implied that PLC work applied to the profession.

The final survey question investigated the interest in participation and learning within PLCs that focused on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice. Administrators were asked to rate their level of interest from a score of 1 = no interest, to a score of 5 = high-level of interest. Data suggested that 100% of rural school administrators have 100% interest in PLCs where participation and learning are focused on professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. All administrators selected a score of 5 (high-level interest) for participation, and learning within PLCs focused on those three outcomes.

Focus Group Survey. There was a larger span of rural school teacher perceptions and experiences with PLCs across all campuses. All five survey questions and sub-survey questions were answered using a 5-point scale. A score of 1 was the lowest or most negative score that could be selected. A score of 5 was the highest or most positive score on the scale chosen by rural school teachers.

The first survey question focused on the level of knowledge about PLCs. A score of 1 represented no experience. A score of 5 indicated a high-level of experience. Overall, 83% of teachers reported having a knowledge base with PLCs that ranged between a score of 3 and 4. Eleven percent of teachers felt they were under a score of 5, which showed a high level of

experience with PLCs. No teacher denoted a score of 1 for this inquiry. Only one teacher selected a score of 2 on a scale from 1 to 5.

Question 2 referred to the level of training regarding PLCs. A score of 1 was equivalent to no training. A score of 5 indicated a high level of training. Eleven percent shared they had no PLC training. Approximately 67% of teachers expressed they had PLC training that fell in the score range of a 2 and 3, which represented that teachers had some to minimal PLC training. Seventeen percent had more experience than not, with a score of 4. Only one teacher selected a score of 5, which implied a high-level of PLC training.

The third survey question was comprised of three parts. The question looked at the effects PLCs had on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices. Teachers rated their level of understanding for each part. Of 18 teachers, 83% felt they had more understanding than not about the effects PLCs had on professional growth. Eighty-nine percent felt they had more of an understanding than not about the effects PLCs had on improving instructional practices. Increased student achievement feedback fell within levels 3 and 4; approximately 78% of teachers had a higher understanding than not about the effect PLCs had on increasing student achievement.

Question 4 concentrated on specific PLC elements: (a) unproductive to productive PLCs, (b) not task-oriented to task-oriented PLCs, (c) not collaborative to collaborative PLCs, and (d) work not applicable to the profession to work applies to the profession. Over 50% of teachers who responded to the survey felt that PLCs were productive and task-oriented approximately 50% of the time. Additionally, 50% reported that PLCs were more collaborative than not. There was a more varied response with work either applying or not applying to PLCs. Almost all teachers selected a score range of 3 to 5. Within that range, 39% selected a score of 4. Overall,

the data indicated that 16 of the 18 participants felt a positive experience with PLC work was productive, task-oriented, collaborative, and applicable to the profession.

The final question gauged rural school teachers' interests in PLCs that targeted professional growth, increased student achievement, and improved instructional practices. Fifty-six percent of teachers selected a score of 5, which represented a high-level of interest. Only one of the 18 participants felt they had no interest in this type of participation and learning. The majority of participants selected a score of 3 or 4, equal to 39%, which indicated that teachers had a high level of interest in PLCs that concentrated on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice.

Focus Group and Interview Findings

The purpose of focus group and administrator interviews was to collect data about the perceptions rural school system educators and leaders have regarding the implementation and participation in PLCs and the impact PLCs have on professional growth, student achievement, and improving instructional practice. I interviewed volunteers from each participating campus and administration. Administrator participants were interviewed in a one-on-one environment. There were four administrator participants. I used the following pseudonyms for them to disguise their identity in the reporting of the findings: A1, A2, A3, and A4.

Teacher participants were interviewed in a focus group setting. There were 18 teacher participants total among three campuses. I also used pseudonyms for teacher participants. Since the focus groups represented three campuses (elementary, middle, and high schools), I used the following pseudonyms for the elementary teachers: E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5. The middle school teachers were represented by M1–M7, and the high school teachers were denoted by H1–H6.

Once the teacher and administrators agreed to participate in the interview process, I administered a survey, and scheduled an interview. Before the interview began, I explained the protocols and processes. The interviews were recorded using GoToMeeting. Questions were projected during the interview using PowerPoint via the share screen feature within GoToMeeting. Administrator interviews averaged one-hour in length. Focus group interviews averaged 50 minutes in length.

Interview Findings. The first interview question asked administrators to discuss their campus professional learning communities. The next questions asked administrators: "Would you describe your campus as being effective with professional learning communities? If so, what is the sense of connection within your campus PLCs? Please provide specific examples." These questions allowed administrators to reflect on the effectiveness of implementation with PLCs on their campus. Participant A1 shared how PLCs cannot be a "one size fits all" model for rural school systems. Three of the four administrators stated that PLCs felt ineffective and did not seem to function more than a large group meeting or faculty meeting. All administrator participants indicated that PLCs were more like a staff meeting than a PLC. Participant A2 shared that PLC effectiveness was impacted by a lack of follow-through and follow-up within the classroom environment beyond PLC meetings. Participant A3 shared that there has been resistance at different points because of a lack of knowledge on how to interact within PLCs, impacting the level of effectiveness. Ultimately, participant A4 felt challenged to design custom PLCs specific to campus and teacher needs effectively; this administrator shared that more guidance is needed to reach minimal effectiveness.

The administrator interview protocol asked participants to describe the strength of commitment by teachers towards professional growth. I asked them to provide examples of

teachers' commitment as individuals and collectively. I also asked that if this was not present, why did they think that was the case. This question caused participants to reflect on teachers' professional growth as individuals and as a team or campus. All administrators indicated a healthy level of commitment by teachers towards professional growth. The commitment is based on the historical amount of professional development teachers request to attend in any given school year. Participant A1 stated that professional development requests were constant, and teachers were looking for ways to grow and improve as individuals and a group. The administrators shared that a requirement of teachers' evaluation is a professional and growth goal. Professional growth has been a critical component for the obtainment of the goals set by leaders and teachers. Participant A2 indicated that teachers participated in more professional growth than they had ever before (inside and outside the campus). More teachers asked to go to professional development and asked for advice about the professional development they should attend. Participant A3 communicated that campus teachers sought professional growth opportunities and had a mindset that was willing to change to improve their professional growth. The mindset leaders refer to matters because of how it affects the acceptance of new learning, leading to individual and collective growth. Participant A4 boasted that teachers are excited to attend an annual conference and network for self-improvement.

Another set of questions from the administrator interview protocol asked participants the following: "Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers toward increasing student achievement? Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?" This question caused participants to reflect on work within PLCs related to student achievement. All participants reiterated that teachers' commitment towards increasing student achievement was present, and teachers want to achieve

and are willing to try something different for improvement. Participant A1 emphasized, “You have to teach in such a way that students learn.” Participant A2 shared, “The level of commitment this year is to make sure that our campus never gets into this situation again (low rating), evidenced by teachers’ willingness to be open to research, explore data, and review data.” Participant A3 focused on reflective teachers by saying the following:

> Are they all wanting to do what is necessary to make what is needed to happen? I gave it a go with reviewing teacher lesson plans and looking at them closely. Teams reflected during PLC. We ended up with exemplar lessons for each grade level and put them into Google Drive and shared it for the next time it was needed and could refer to the processes to strengthen increasing student achievement.

Administrators communicated that a majority of their focus for PLC planning was to increase student achievement because of the domino effect from any professional practice that impacts this PLC attribute. Participant A4 shared that challenging the kids was classroom-specific and intentional for increasing student achievement, and teachers on campus have intentionality in their action plans within PLCs.

The next questions asked administrators the following: “Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers toward improving instructional practices. Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?” This caused leaders to reflect on instructional practices. All of the administrators referred to short-term and long-term goal setting as part of the work completed on campuses that supports teachers’ commitment to improving instructional practices. Participant A1 shared that teachers’ commitment to improving instructional practices occured when teachers could invest the time and energy into materials that work to make instruction better and easier for them to do their

craft. Participants A2 and A3 felt buy-in for improving instructional practices was developed through an on-going process reflecting on short- and long-term goals. Participant A3 also indicated that teachers improved instructional practices when they were allowed to manipulate their lessons and manipulate the instruction to fit their students' needs. Participant A3 and A4 indicated that variety and allowing teachers to try different things, models, and teaching methods increased teacher efficacy and impacted how teachers worked to improve instructional practice. All participants indicated that they would like to continue to find ways to improve instructional practices beyond PLC meetings.

Administrators then responded to the following question: "Does PLC participation on your campus have an effect on (a) professional growth, (b) increasing student achievement, (c) improving instructional practices?" All administrators shared that PLC participation has impacted professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. Participant A1 stated that "iron sharpens iron" and related this phrase to teachers working together and sharing to improve one another's craft, therefore getting more robust over time. Participant A1 also shared that when teachers learn to teach better, students should be taught better and learn better, leading to a positive impact on professional growth and trust among leaders and teachers. Participant A2 expressed that professional development impacts PLCs' effects on this question's three attributes. Participant A2 would like to see more strategy-specific professional development for teachers because of the larger-scale impact on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice. Participant A2 also articulated that data digs caused staff to converse about student performance, improving student achievement. Participant A3 stated,

> All three PLC attributes impacted the campus in a cycle-type process; conversations that are related to and based around student growth and improving performance have led to other conversations about professional growth, which led to professional development and increasing student performance.

Participant A4 shared that although PLCs may not yet be structured to impact the three attributes profoundly, work toward more positive influences in these three areas occured through work via book studies. Teachers are helpful and willing to assist teammates wherever needed to help each other succeed.

The final question of the interview protocol was the following: "What is needed to either implement or restructure PLCs on your campus to positively impact: a) professional growth, b) increasing student achievement, c) improving instructional practices?" All administrator responses aligned to similar PLC characteristics that would influence professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. All four participants felt PLCs needed to be more data-driven to focus on-campus performance, allow for PLCs to become teacher-led to grow ownership, and create time for teacher reflection for the refinement of work that impacts all three for continuous improvement. Participants A2, A3, and A4 also felt that teacher mindset impacts PLC work at all levels and in multiple directions.

Finally, all participants were asked this question: "Do you have any additional thoughts you would like to add in regards to rural school PLCs?" This question allowed participants to respond freely and add input they may have missed sharing in prior responses. Participant A1 added that

> I have had to make sure that I do not allow my former skepticism to get in the way and not think, "no PLCs do not work" because I know they can function effectively and are important for our teachers to build community and grow professionally.

Participant A2 expressed that rural school PLCs have been a new experience, and so learning to adapt other models to fit rural school PLCs is a learning process. Participant A3 advocated having been in both large and rural school PLCs, rural school PLCs look different in a larger setting, and therefore, you must be creative with how teacher learning opportunities will be provided. Participant A3 also added that although rural school PLCs look different, you cannot allow teachers to fall into isolating themselves versus being a community of learners, because they can still learn instructional practices from one another, even if in different content areas. All administrators felt that PLC implementation in a rural school system is a challenge. However, it is a challenge that needs to be overcome for the betterment of the school system. Participant A4 felt that perhaps as the leader, they are the weakest link and limited by lack of experience with rural school PLCs.

Focus Group Findings. The first focus group question asked this set of questions: "When you hear the term professional learning community, what comes to mind? How does it make you feel when you hear the term PLC?" This question allowed focus group participants to share what feelings or thoughts were evoked when they heard the PLC acronym.

Elementary campus participants had minimal background knowledge or experience with PLCs on their campus. E1 and E5 had PLC experience from a previous workplace. All five participants indicated that their school PLCs felt mandatory in nature and, at times, felt like an unnecessary meeting. Participant E2 said, "I have never really fully understood what we were supposed to do." Participant E4 added that "I'm not one-hundred percent sure what PLCs are

supposed to look like." Participant E3 communicated that agendas help teachers know what will be discussed and planned for the upcoming week. Participants E1 and E5, who had prior PLC experience, shared that PLCs at their current campus was led by the principal versus feeling collaborative and more teacher-led.

Middle school campus participants appeared to have the most background knowledge and experience with PLCs on their campus. All seven participants shared that PLC participation created a positive impact on their craft, the teaching profession, and generated excitement to dive into work with teammates. All participants communicated that PLCs were about coming together to collaborate to make the best decisions for students and the campus through data analysis. Three focus group members shared that the term PLC made them think of common goals. M1 said, "PLCs are about collaboration and looking at student data to make educated decisions on how to execute lessons." Participants M2, M3, and M6 shared that they no longer felt intimidated about their experience with colleagues in PLCs. M6 also expressed that experienced teachers also benefited from PLCs because they learned through other teammates, new innovations, and content that could be used to do things differently with students; this created a more open-minded mindset. M7 said, "I'm excited to get into PLCs with staff" and learn from "different experiences and perspectives from teachers." Participants from the middle school campus were more worried about losing the excitement for PLCs as the year progressed due to work, life, and administrative routines.

High school campus participants had background knowledge of PLCs. All six participants communicated their thoughts about what the term *professional learning community* caused them to feel when they heard it about their current situation and what they believed the term evoked. There were mixed perceptions shared by this group. All six participants believed

that PLCs should be about a group of professionals coming together to collaborate toward a common purpose. Participant H2 said, “I don’t really have a wonderful connection to this term, but when I look outside my own experience with it, I would see an opportunity to work with people in your field.” H1 added, “Although I think we come together to attempt collaboration, PLCs do not seem very planned, and we do not get to follow-through work.” Participant H6 gave a different perspective on PLCs being collaborative and specific to campus needs. Also, H6 indicated that there is more collaboration when teachers are put into smaller groups outside of a large PLC faulty meeting. Participant H3 shared, “I know PLCs are about collaborative work toward an end goal, but PLCs instead are perhaps not presented correctly by leadership.” All six participants communicated that PLC work should include strategizing together to develop the best course of action towards a goal to improve students’ and teachers’ outcomes.

Another focus group interview question asked the following: “What effect do you believe PLC participation has on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices?” This question prompted focus group participants to reflect on their personal beliefs about three key PLC attributes, and the effects each produce on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices.

Out of the three critical attributes of this query, all elementary school participants shared that PLC participation had the potential to impact professional growth the most positively; participants also lightly addressed the other two characteristics. It is important to note that elementary school participants had the least experience with PLCs. Participant E1 stated, “Through PLCs, teachers should get together as a grade-level team for deeper concentration on specific grade-level needs to help each other grow.” Participant E4 expressed that PLCs could “help me professionally grow as a teacher because I would be able to ask my colleagues

questions." Professional growth was essential to all five participants. Participants E2 and E4 believed that PLCs improve instructional practices when you look for ways to improve as a team, which in turn allows teachers to grow professionally as an educator.

The middle school campus participant responses were from the perspective of a current active participant in PLC. All seven participants felt PLCs positively affected professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices. Participant M1 stated, "PLCs are a wonderful resource for teachers to grow by getting together and exploring what works for students and what works in the teaching." Participant M1 also focused on student achievement and expressed that the execution of a lesson targeted toward students' learning styles can be refined in a PLC as a team, allowing teachers to become stronger with instructional practice and ultimately increase student growth within their learning environment. Participant M2 shared, "Professional growth for me is about hearing from other teachers about new ideas, new strategies, and new ways to implement things while collaborating." These perspectives cause a teacher to grow, increase student achievement, and improve their instructional practices. All seven participants expressed that working together through collaboration, understanding student data, and sharing ideas was the foundation for growth and improvement of all three attributes.

The high school campus participants responded from the lens of what they believe effective PLC participation would foster and do for their campus mixed with their feedback on the current reality. Participant H1 started the responses with the following: "If we could stay true to the definition of a PLC, then I believe all three attributes would be positively impacted with PLC work. Currently, I do not believe our PLC work lends itself to this." Participant H2 shared that PLCs would have a positive effect on professional growth, student achievement, and

instructional practices if PLCs were implemented the way they were intended. Participant H2 said, “I don’t feel I’ve ever grown through our PLCs.” Participant H3 focused on the level of participation by teachers and how it is led by the administration. Participant H3 stated,

> Teachers need to participate in PLCs to achieve professional growth, student achievement, and improve instructional practice. These actions start from the top down. Participation also involves listening to others, observing others, reflecting on their experiences, and your own for improvement.

A more novice teacher (H6) within the group shared that if PLCs are done properly, they affect professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. Participant H6 stated, “The right PLC experience is good for a teacher like me, who is newer and has a lot to learn.” Participant H5 expressed how important it is to learn from one another and also discuss specific student needs because one teacher may know how to connect with certain students in a more effective way than another teacher does. Overall, all seven participants understood the effect of PLCs on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice. However, the current PLC environment did not always support the outcomes they desired.

The next interview question asked, “From your perception, what is needed to either implement, restructure, or improve PLCs on your campus?” This query allowed participants to reflect on the active PLC environment they are a part of, versus the one they would like to have.

Elementary school campus participants shared they did not know enough about PLCs to fully understand the difference between this question and the prior one; some responses were similar to those given in the previous question. Participant E4 began the responses saying, “We need whole-group and individual grade-level PLCs.” E3 added, “We need different types of

PLCs where things that do not change from meeting to meeting so that we can all be on the same page." Participant E5 chimed stating, "We should add PLC meetings that involve multiple grade levels together to work on alignment. There also needs to be an agenda." ParticipanE2 hesitated to share that "I think there is just a restructure that is needed for our campus only. Maybe we rotate different styles by month." Participant E1 closed out the feedback and said, "We need more efficient PLCs that have a purpose, follow an agenda, and involves all teachers."

The middle school campus participants shared many positive aspects and had minimal feedback for restructuring or refining PLCs. Participant M1 raved about how the campus culture is great, meetings are consistent, and norms are set. Participant M2 shared, "PLCs are quite successful." Participant M3 added, "We are all excited to contribute and start the year in PLCs." Participants M4 and M5 stated that they start the year with lots of energy, and PLC topics are focused. Participant M6 communicated that PLCs take place weekly. Participant M7 shared, "It is nice. We have time set aside to focus on professionalism, learning communities, have set norms, and follow a set agenda." All seven participants had some common tweaks for improvement: a) teacher input for agenda items versus administrator only, b) find ways to embed energizing or reboot activities throughout the year, so PLC excitement and positive energy continues throughout the year, and c) follow-through with what happened next or after an idea was implemented through more reflection time allotted in PLC time.

The high school campus participants believed that PLC work begins from the "top-down", as leadership leads and models the work. All six participants felt that the follow-up or follow-through component never came to fruition, so reflection or refinement is never obtained. Participant H1 shared, "Our PLCs have norms, and those need to continue." Participant H2 added, "We need a better purpose for our work in PLC. We need to know why we are here. We

need to understand why we are doing what we are doing." Participant H3 stated that there needs to be a clear focus. Participant H3 later added, "It all comes back to trust from leadership for us to do our job; it all comes with everyone being on board with the work." Participant H6 said, "I think we need a common goal or purpose. Professional learning communities don't need to feel like we are just doing them to say we do or have forced collaboration."

A final opportunity was given to participants by ending with the following question: "Is there anything that you wanted to share about rural school PLCs that you didn't get to share in the questions that were asked?" This question was not required of all participants. I asked the question for those that felt compelled to share other thoughts about PLCs. Only two participants from the elementary school campus responded. Participants E1 and E5 both shared similar thoughts about PLC changes needed: "Our current set-up is not working and needs to be revisited," and "our PLCs need to be more than a faculty meeting." The middle school campus had three participants respond to the final question. Participant M7 emphasized, "An important factor that we need to remember in rural schools is that teachers wear so many hats. They are not just the teacher; they are also a coach, bus driver, teacher mentor, and more." Participant M1 added, "In a rural system, we may not have a department; it may just be one teacher per grade level or one teacher for a subject for multiple grade levels." Participant M3 closed out the feedback: "We may need to look at other types of meetings and lead them as PLCs, like in vertical teams or special populations, to be as effective as possible in a rural school system."

The high school focus group also had three participants volunteer to respond to the final question. H1 emphasized the following:

> There needs to be more we can look at in PLCs. As stated earlier, we may only have one teacher that teachers a subject for three grade levels. So, the content may need to be cross-curricular or strategy-based versus content-specific.

Participant H3 shared, “I can’t say it enough. We need focus. Everyone needs to know where they are going and why. You can’t just say we are going to have a meeting. PLCs need to be organized.” Finally, H2 indicated that teachers in a rural school district are fortunate to be in a small district where they know the kids, are well-connected to the community, and embrace this as an opportunity within PLCs.

Emerging Themes

A blend of NVivo and process-coding techniques helped identify commonalities in participant responses, which derived multiple categories. These categories created the study’s themes. Three common themes emerged as the most influential factors contributing to the components of rural school teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of PLCs. I combined both sets of information and reported administrators’ responses first and focus group responses second. These themes were collaboration, implementation factors, and positive outcomes (Appendix F).

Theme 1: Collaboration

One common thread among participant responses was collaboration (the action of working with someone to produce or create something). Collaboration was one of the most common attributes given about the perceptions regarding the implementation and participation in PLCs within a rural school system. Overall, administrators and teachers indicated the importance of collaboration for effective PLCs. Words and phrases, such as “working together,” “common strategies,” “common goals,” “goal setting,” “sharing research-based practices,” “relationships,”

"teachers work and plan together," "camaraderie is important," "it is where we should talk about what is working and not working," and "coming together for student and teacher growth," were repetitively stated throughout the interview process with administrators and focus group teachers. A combination of rural school administrators and teacher comments reinforced that collaboration could positively influence PLC implementation and participation.

Administrators illustrated the power collaboration brings when it takes place through teachers working together to improve students' outcomes. When asked about the effectiveness of their campus PLCs, A1 alluded to collaboration by stating that

> I think PLCs are beginning to be effective. I think our rural school system took ideas from other communities or larger schools and tried to make a one-size-fits-all model. In years past, they have been seen as glorified staff meetings where administrators come in and hold a staff meeting rather than a collaborative one. We see more collaboration within PLC meetings that are focused on a common purpose.

Participant A2 shared,

> This was the first year my campus participated in professional learning communities more than staff meetings. We effectively allotted time and space on the calendar for content conversations. What I know PLCs to be (i.e., common strategies and goals through collaboration) compared to where we are, well, we are ineffective. We need to improve.

Participant A3 also indicated that

> I do not think we are effective yet with PLCs. I think our journey just started, and we now understand what PLCs should be. A year ago, teachers' understanding of PLCs was a faculty meeting. We have grown through PLCs' professional development, but it is slow

> because we have had resistance at different points due to relationships and professional behavior within PLCs. So, we still have growth toward collaboration and common purpose.

Participant A4 closed out feedback and said,

> I believe PLCs are important to our work as a campus community. Sometimes I think I am the weakest link, and as the leader, I have to be the leader of learning. I am limited on my PLC experience, which impacts what transcends to teachers in PLCs. I need to grow in all aspects of PLC work. You are "only as strong as your weakest link."

Administrators shared what the reality of campus PLCs was. The feedback described a mix of current PLC practice, complementary areas of need, and administrator viewpoints about the necessity of teachers working together more, developing joint strategies and goals to get to the level of effective PLC implementation and participation. Administrators recognized the importance of teachers feeling safe to be able to share out and participate in PLCs. Participant A2 suggested, "Teachers can speak and share out freely when there is trust within the group; they become risk-takers." Participant A3 said, "Teachers will share more in smaller groups because of trust than they will in a whole-staff PLC set-up."

Participants explained the influence of collaboration in their description of what this should look like when working in PLCs. When asked about the perception that comes to mind when they hear the term PLC, focus group participant E2 shared,

> Before this year, I never fully understood what we were supposed to do. Agendas help. Looking at strategies and using data to make the best decisions for students helped me understand our purpose. I have participated in PLCs that were also vertical, but not at this school. We are small and should look at different types of PLC experiences.

Participant E4 added,

> I am not one-hundred percent sure what PLCs are supposed to look like, but I know what I have experienced. Here we have met as a grade level and as a whole-staff group. It is usually driven by the administration, although it has been driven by someone else a few times. We are meeting and discussing things together. Those talks helped me learn a lot.

A different campus middle school teacher (M2) stated,

> When I hear the term professional learning community, I think about collaboration amongst teachers. I think of an entire campus coming together to discuss what is working and not working for students. I think of teachers strategizing new ways to address our students' needs, including using data positively. I also think PLCs are about learning, like learning new techniques and applying those in our teaching and then coming back to share how it played out in the classroom. The opinions and methods shared are respected by everyone on the PLC team.

The combination of focus group participant comments about what comes to mind when they hear the term PLC reinforced the idea that collaboration (coming together and working together toward a common purpose) was a significant component of PLCs. It ultimately impacted professional growth, student achievement, and improved instructional practice. However, teachers' responses varied, and some alluded to collaboration not being effectively implemented within the PLC culture. Participant H3 indicated, "PLCs function when leadership sets the tone for collaboration. The expectation for collaboration needs to be communicated and modeled in PLCs." Participant H1 added, "I do not think PLCs are organized. When they are not organized, then minimal collaboration occurs, and we sit and get content." Participant H2 added

a final comment, “I do not think we ever get to results or follow-through in our work to be able to come back and be collaborative about what we learned or were supposed to implement.”

Theme 2: Implementation Factors

Rural school administrators and teachers suggested that various implementation factors (vital and poor leadership issues, positive and negative teacher actions) impacted PLC implementation and participation. Administrators and focus group interview participants expressed their thoughts about implementation factors using the following phrases: “common norms,” “working with a plan,” “having a focus is key,” “a leader’s experience or lack of experience can impact PLCs,” “teachers want time to process information,” “need reflection time,” “no follow-through,” “no follow-up,” “PLCs are more like a staff meeting,” “PLC work requires intentionality,” “work on mindset,” “data-driven,” “no islands allowed,” “starts with leadership,” “teacher voice,” “teacher-led,” “time constraints,” “need goals,” “need purpose,” “one size does not fit all,” and “need to address various student and staff needs.” The perceptions of rural leadership and focus group feedback reinforced that implementation factors could influence PLC implementation and participation.

Administrators explained the effect implementation factors had on PLCs when positive and negative leadership issues and teacher actions occurred. When asked about strong and poor leadership issues that impacted PLC implementation, A1 shared,

> Our PLCs need to be about a specific objective rather than just covering campus news or information that could be covered in an email or faculty meeting. There should be a set purpose for the meeting. There should be a set time allocated to discuss the curriculum and its implementation in the classroom. We need to tie the curriculum conversation to accountability.

Participant A2 shared,

> I want to improve how I implement PLCs on my campus. My plan for PLCs is to build upon our agenda and use of time. We need to move into more data conversations. We also need to embed more structured professional development about looking at all types of data in all grade levels. I want teachers to become the leaders of their PLC, and it should not always be led by me (principal).

Participant A3 said,

> My goal is to develop engaging activities, either administrator-led or teacher-led, that captivate the audience for twenty-five to thirty minutes. I would like for teachers to talk about the good things working in their lessons, model it, go back and try it, and then return to reflect. I think student achievement should be a critical factor in our learning and improvement of instructional practice. They all are attributes that work hand-in-hand and are needed to implement successful PLCs.

Feedback voiced vital and poor leadership issues that need to be fostered or changed to implement PLCs effectively. Administrators' levels of experience with PLC work varied from campus to campus. Participant A2 stated, "PLCs are impacted by a leader's experience or lack of experience. Leader's actions and mindsets also impact PLC implementation." Participant A3 also added, "Teachers are hesitant to participate, which means we need to provide activities that support a culture of participation and minimizes resistance to change." Ultimately, it was understood that PLC implementation in a rural school system differs from those in a larger school district. Therefore, it is critical not to allow teachers to become an individual school house or, as A4 communicated, "fall into an island of isolation."

Participants described the power of implementation factors in their description of how they positively and negatively affected PLC implementation. When asked about what was needed to implement, restructure, or improve PLCs on their campus, H3 expressed, “Teacher’s voice needs to be a part of the PLC planning process and for teachers to lead the PLC work.” A focus group participant, E5, communicated that

> In a rural school community, we need different PLC models to target and address multiple areas. We need to meet as a whole staff because we are small and several of us wear many hats. We need to meet as a smaller grade-level team to discuss specific lesson designs and student needs. We should also meet in multiple grade levels, on our campus and outside of our campus, to work on vertical alignment.

Participant E2 added, “Perhaps a rotation schedule, where there is a different type of PLC gathering by week, would help us meet all of our needs.” A different campus participant, M3, indicated that “I think our campus does a great job of implementing PLCs.”

Focus group participants shared overlapping implementation factors that aligned with administrator feedback. Ultimately, teachers are looking for leadership guidance and support to foster teacher-led and task-oriented PLCs. Setting common goals with specific strategic action steps to achieve the goal through one or multiple PLCs also impacts teachers’ perceptions about PLC implementation factors.

Theme 3: Positive Outcomes

Rural school leadership and focus group participants indicated that PLCs generated positive outcomes on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices with effective PLC implementation and participation. Participants expressed positive outcomes through words and phrases, such as “teachers need to manipulate

instruction and curriculum to meet student needs," "teachers need to try different things," "teachers need to take risks," "teachers are willing to help one another," "PLCs impact professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices," "teachers request to attend much professional learning," "teachers work together to improve their craft and skill," "teachers take ownership of learning," "it is about student learning," "critical for student achievement," "positive culture leads to a positive outcome," "bounce ideas," "reflection allows us to build off of one another," and "reflection leads to a growth mindset." These were robust descriptors given about positive outcomes from PLC implementation and participation.

Administrators defended the importance of PLC implementation and participation through detailed descriptions of positive outcomes that lead to professional growth, higher student achievement, and more robust instructional practices within schools. When asked whether PLC implementation and participation impacts professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice, A1 responded, "There is a verse in the Bible that says, 'iron sharpens iron,' so when teachers see and hear of others' successes, they can quickly become their successes too."

Participant A2 shared,

> I hope our teachers grow because of the learning occurring in our professional learning communities. One of my intentions is to have teachers leave each meeting with some new knowledge or thought process to help them look at their instruction in a new way or refine their instruction to make stronger connections between students and the content.

Participant A3 indicated,

> A certain amount of peer accountability needs to occur to help teachers motivate one another with the follow-through of PLC work. PLCs can positively affect the campus and

> improve the learning environment for students through a clear focus and purposeful action plan to work on tasks that support increased student achievement, improving instructional practice, and providing professional growth.

Participant A4 expressed the following:

> The work is a cycle. You cannot have work on one attribute without the other attributes. All three (professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practice) intertwine and overlap. Meaningful PLCs impact all three of those. Our campus improvement plan also supports the work in PLCs and the work towards all three components.

Administrator responses that created the positive outcomes theme proved that purposeful PLC work within professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practice is needed to obtain staff and student success within PLCs and beyond.

Focus group participants described the positive outcomes on teacher professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practices in the classroom and their significance through PLC implementation and participation. When I asked teachers if they believed PLC participation had positive outcomes on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice, E1 shared, “Coming together in PLCs allowed teachers to concentrate more on specific grade-level and student needs.” A novice teacher, E4, shared,

> I looked forward to PLC meetings because they helped me grow professionally. I was able to ask my teammates questions on how I can better work with a student who needed help. I was able to learn how to look at data to increase my students’ performance. I was

> able to ask for modeling of the craft, so I could teach it right the first time versus going back and correcting my mistakes after I taught the skill. I believe PLCs helped me a lot.

An experienced teacher, M5 communicated that

> grade-level PLCs are great for all types of growth because you get to bounce ideas off your teammates. You can work together to make sure you are teaching the depth needed for students. You can work toward achieving a school and district goal. There are more improvements we can make to continue to get stronger with PLCs. We are heading in the right direction.

Participant M7 stated,

> PLCs have the most significant impact when multiple minds work strategically and with a common focus keeping what is best for students and staff at the forefront of the work. When achieved, a positive impact occurs with all three attributes.

Focus group teacher participants shared their want for effective PLC participation. They believed that positive outcomes could occur from effective PLC participation when PLCs are implemented effectively and attract active participation.

Summary

This chapter introduced the study and the one overarching research question and three sub-questions that I investigated. I reviewed the sequence I used to conduct the study, refined the protocols with pilot group feedback, and analyzed the survey responses, administrator, and focus group interviews. Furthermore, in this chapter, I discussed three major themes and ten categories that emerged from the investigation. I explained how the data answered the overarching research question. In Chapter 5, I provide a summary of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Since the origin of PLCs, there has been an abundance of research on the impact PLCs have on teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practice. Education studies have provided extensive research into forming and maintaining PLCs (Brodie, 2013; DuFour, 2004, 2014, 2015; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Easton, 2015). DuFour et al. (2010) emphasized that PLCs were founded on "a focus on learning; a collaborative culture with a focus on the learning of all; a collective inquiry into best practice and current reality; action orientation: learning by doing, a commitment to continuous improvement; and results orientation" (pp. 4–5). However, there is limited research on rural school administrators' and teachers' perceptions and experiences with implementing and participating in PLCs.

Rural school systems face different circumstances due to limited resources, such as human resources, funding, accessibility, and size, that cause PLCs to function differently than they would in larger school systems. According to Walden (2015), rural students in the United States are underprivileged compared to their urban counterparts in student achievement, and teachers are under-resourced in collaboration. Turbine ISD faces the same dilemma as other rural school districts with PLC implementation and participation, impacting teacher and student performance. The TISD has seen a decline in student performance across core content areas, with more extensive reading and writing gaps.

A decline in academic performance is an issue that many rural school systems face across the state of Texas. In particular, Texas has the highest number of rural students than 17 states combined with the lowest rural student population (Showalter et al., 2019). Texas has more than two thousand campuses classified as rural schools (Texas Rural Schools Task Force, 2017). The

Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provided 2019 data on states from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) outcomes. Texas was found to be below the national average in student outcomes. For example, the average score in reading in 2019 for Texas-based students was 256, which was lower than their average score in 2017 (260) and in 1998 (261) (NCES, 2019).

PLCs are proven to impact teacher growth, student achievement, and teacher instructional practices (DuFour et al., 2006), which ultimately impact students' overall achievement, accountability data, and performance. PLCs are significantly affected by teacher perception and buy-in with critical attributes to improve and sustain teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practices.

This qualitative case study aimed to identify teacher and administrator perceptions about PLC implementation for professional growth, increasing student achievement, and the effects of participation on improving instructional practices. I used qualitative research to gather, analyze, and interpret the data from a pilot study group, survey, one-on-one administrator interviews, and teacher focus group interviews. A pilot study group provided suggestions for the refinement of the survey questions and interview protocols. I gave a survey to all study participants to gather a lens to their PLC background and knowledge base. The overarching research question that guided the study was the following: "What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation and participation in PLCs?" The study addressed the following sub-research questions:

- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on professional growth?

- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on increasing student achievement?
- What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the effects of PLCs on instructional practices?

The population of the study consisted of a total of 22 participants, which included four administrators and 18 teachers. Administrator interviews were in a one-on-one setting. Teacher focus group interviews varied in size by campus. There were three campuses in total. There was one focus group per campus. I used the framework method (Gale, 2013) to analyze the data collected. The seven-step process led to identifying evidence and subcategories, common main categories, and three major themes.

Chapter 5 focuses on the interpretation of the study findings from the survey and interview feedback that contribute to a better understanding of the perceptions and experiences of rural school teachers and administrators with PLC implementation and participation to improve teacher growth, student achievement, and instructional practices. The assimilation of the analyzed data and the research literature, current district PLC practices, and recommendations within the study's limitations provide an interpretation and recommendation from current to future PLC practices. Each theme's specific implications are addressed, and recommendations within each theme are identified. Reflections and conclusions are also included in the chapter.

Discussion of Findings

This qualitative single case study's central focus was the perception of rural school administrators and teachers' perspectives on the implementation and participation in PLCs. It was imperative to examine administrator and teacher PLC background knowledge and understand where each campus was with PLC implementation or practice. The data analysis

revealed the following categories: working together, common strategies, common goals, strong leadership issues, poor leadership issues, teacher positive actions, teacher negative actions, student achievement, instructional practice, and professional growth. Further examination of the categories took place to generate centralized themes. The themes established were collaboration, implementation factors, and positive outcomes. These themes were evident in answering the overarching research question and sub-questions.

Theme 1: Collaboration

Collaboration was a key theme that was defined by the data. The data analysis exposed that the participation of teachers in a PLC provided them the opportunity to work together, share common strategies and ideas, and set common goals. Collaboration practices are essential to PLCs and contribute to school improvement and cultivate healthier relationships between teachers (Harmon, 2017). According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), for PLCs to be effective, four prerequisites must be met:

- Time for collaboration must be built within the school day and year;
- The purpose of collaboration must be made explicit, and structures must be provided to facilitate it;
- Educators must be trained and supported in their efforts to become effective collaborators; and
- Educators must accept their individual and collective responsibilities for working together as true professional colleagues. (pp. 124–125)

The interview results indicated that administrators believed in collaboration as a vital component of PLC success. From the administrators' perspective, collaboration consisted of "multiple layers." Administrators expressed the need for an environment in which culture

allowed teachers to set common goals and "take ownership of their learning" through trust. The common goals acted as a guide for teachers to set action steps, defined by common strategies and ideas, to achieve the goal. This technique also helped teachers be accountable for their learning and work with one another during PLCs. Leaders conveyed the importance and practice of constructing a "shared leadership" environment with teachers. A district-level leader indicated that collaboration "could be easy if modeled correctly and expected." The elementary school administrator shared that within PLCs, "teachers work and plan together," and teachers within each PLC grade-level group lead conversations about content with their teammates.

The focus group interview results indicated that teachers believed in collaboration and desired it. However, there was a distinct emphasis on what they desired versus what was reality, which varied. From the teacher lens, collaboration was about coming together for a greater purpose through common goal setting to address the needs of teachers and students. The camaraderie was essential to teachers. Teachers emphasized that PLC meetings should not become administrative faculty meetings but shared meetings.

Theme 2: Implementation Factors

Interview questions revealed evidence that participants understood what an effective PLC looked like, but they did not necesarily understand the PLC process. These results indicated the similarities and differences of perceptions between administrators and teachers within the same campus regarding implementation and significant PLC involvement. Although the survey and interview participants perceived the implementation of PLCs as positive, many highlighted circumstances indicating a lack of teacher buy-in. The data analysis showed that strong and poor leadership issues and positive and negative teacher actions impacted PLC implementation. Hord (2009) identified supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and

vision, supportive physical conditions, people capacities, and shared personal practices as the core attributes of an effective PLC.

Leadership identified the factors that rural school administrators perceived to have the most impact on establishing and sustaining effective PLCs. The interview results indicated that administrators believed that leadership issues and teacher actions impacted PLC implementation and teacher participation. Principals provided feedback on implementation factors that supported and hindered PLC effectiveness. Administrators stated that buy-in from teachers and crafting expectations were essential factors and seen as going hand-in-hand. Challenges also impacted these PLC attributes. Administrators acknowledged that gaining teacher buy-in was a challenge in itself, as was the mindset. Being in a rural school environment meant some content areas or grade levels had only one teacher for either multiple grades or courses within that subject area. Teachers and administrators may have "multiple hats" that further limit buy-in and mindset. Finding ways to "reduce resistance" to the PLC process, maximizing time, planning with intentionality, and "end in mind" were perceptions administrators felt would also assist with the implemention of and participation in PLCs.

Teacher focus group participants expressed frustrations about implementation factors that affect PLC implementation and participation. Perceptions varied across campuses. Of the three campuses, one stood out and was more positive with responses than the other two campuses. Teacher participants recognized that educators need to see the benefits of their efforts to increase "buy-in" and have "follow-through" with the work. At the same time, teachers also expressed that their principals need to "trust in their roles and abilities" while trusting their leader to "set the direction" for their school. Participants also focused on "follow-through" with work, learning beyond PLCs, scheduling to maximize time in PLCs, and content covered for teacher learning.

Theme 3: Positive Outcomes

PLCs work to improve learning for all students and include job-embedded learning opportunities for teachers (DuFour et al., 2006). Hord (1997) noted that PLCs, if implemented effectively, impact teacher growth and student achievement. Another key theme from the data was positive outcomes. The data analysis found that increasing student achievement, professional growth, and improving instructional practices were the main categories from the theme of positive outcomes.

The interview results revealed a common perception among administrators about the importance of PLCs to positively impact teacher professional growth, student academic performance, and the craft of teaching. Administrators shared that they wanted teachers to "take risks" with their own learning. The most potent aspect of implementation and participation was the power that administrators felt PLCs had in shaping teachers' mindsets, actions, and outcomes. Principals shared that teachers learn best from one another through conversation and modeling, which helps them become more confident and ultimately increases student achievement.

The date from teacher focus interviews supported the notion that TISD teachers knew what effective PLC implementation and participation could do for a campus community. Like administrator perspectives, teachers felt effective PLCs could produce positive outcomes critical to advancing teacher and student learning. The teachers focused on "reflection" and how influential reflection was to teacher development and mindset. Ideally, teachers believed that teacher growth, student achievement, and improving instructional practice occurred when teachers were willing to help one another without judgment while learning from each other.

Collegiality was also very important to the teachers. They stated that more time working toward stronger collegial relationships was also crucial to PLC success.

Additional Findings

The administration participants of the study shared that setting "norms" and "reviewing norms" was essential to PLC implementation. Examples shared by the elementary and middle school administrators explained how they reviewed the norms and therefore provide a system where teachers could hold each other accountable for following or not following a set norms.

I asked the following question in the administrator interviews: "How would you describe your campus culture within PLCs?" This question permitted administrators to think through the impact the school culture had within the dynamics of PLCs. The middle school administrators' perspective was slightly different in scope than the other three administrators. The middle school administrator stated that the culture within PLCs was "at a healthy place." All three campus administrators communicated about the change in PLC culture and how it is "improving" over time. The elementary and high school administrators focused on a slightly different perspective. Both shared that teachers were "hesitant" about interactions in front of their peers and concerned with PLC work becoming "evaluative" in nature. The middle school campus did not feel that way but, instead, was hesitant about sharing data. The principal stated that teachers "did not want to share their data because they did not feel safe doing so, because it was a practice to be evaluated through administrators and by their colleagues."

Administrators were not consistent across all three campuses with their sentiments about the campus culture supporting PLCs. Two administrators from the elementary and high school campuses felt that PLCs were "developing" and "improving the relationships" among staff to improve and support PLCs on campus. The middle school principal expressed that the PLC

environment was about “sharing and learning from one another,” and the work was framed around a “conscious effort” about the teacher’s craft.

Principals also shared that they used their “walkthroughs and observations” to determine what areas needed to be discussed or questioned in PLCs without teachers realizing that it stemmed from those evaluative tools. Principals were clear about PLCs not being evaluative. All campus principals shared that teacher evaluations affected how they thought and approached PLCs. The coaching questions they provided also impact the activities they plan for teachers to expand their thinking and learning.

Teacher participants expressed the importance of PLCs in their professional field. All 18 teacher participants stated that PLC implementation was “very important” to their professional field and critical to advancing student learning. Teachers expressed the importance of coming together and working toward a common purpose. Ultimately, all teacher participants expressed enthusiasm and excitement at the possibility of participating in effective PLCs that were co-led between the administrator and teacher, with specific learning outcomes and future follow-through activities to ensure learning was applied within the classroom and with students.

Teachers also shared challenges that could impact PLC implementation and participation. Concerns about leadership and a need for focused leadership on a goal and set outcomes for effective PLC implementation and participation were common within focus group teacher feedback. Teachers in the district shared that leadership sets the atmosphere for PLCs. The lack of PLC experiences a leader had also impacted how teachers viewed and reacted to the idea of PLCs. Leaders need to be creative with teachers to implement effective PLCs and provide engaging content to impact teacher participation positively. In rural school systems, other concerns stemmed from the small system set-up and size. There may be only one teacher per

grade level or one teacher per content area for two to three grade levels in some rural systems. If not careful, teachers could feel like they were on an island or working in a single schoolhouse.

Teacher focus group participants also focused on teacher self-reflection as a learning component within PLCs. All 18 teacher participants focused on teacher reflection. The TISD teachers expressed that healthy teacher reflection practices stemmed from trust among staff and strong campus culture. Teachers believed that if you felt safe within the campus environment, reflecting honestly and openly was more comfortable and accepted. Teachers shared that when they felt confident as a teacher, it was reflected through their students' successes. Although teachers perceived these actions as vital and could articulate their importance, it did not indicate that these practices were actively in place on campuses.

Theoretical Framework Implications

Constructivist and distributed leadership theories are foundational for implementation and participation with any PLC model. Tam (2000) developed the following four essential constructivist learning characteristics:

1) Knowledge will be shared between educators and students.
2) Teachers and students will share their leadership.
3) The teacher's role is a facilitator of learning.
4) Learning groups will consist of small numbers of heterogeneous students. (pp. 51–53)

PLC participation that stems from leaders and flows through teachers into the classroom is needed for student success. Planning and active participation with PLCs should also be based on distributive leadership. There are leadership skills that affect an organization that do not always come from the campus leader. Within a school system, there are many sources of influence brought forward through distributive leadership (Harris, 2013). Distributive leadership

is about the practice of leadership versus a specific role or responsibility that comes with a title (Harris, 2013). Teachers and students are a great source of leadership within significant campuses; teachers are a great leadership source within PLC models.

Limitations

This qualitative single case study analysis consisted of data collected through the use of a survey, interviews, and focus group interviews. I idenfied four limitations: small group sizes, honest responses, the influence of research biases and experiences with PLCs, and my status as a leader within the school district being studied. The first limitation of this research was the small group size of each campus focus group. Perhaps larger groups would provide a broader array of responses. Since this was a rural school, the number of administrators was limited. No other administrators were available for more varied input from the campus leader's perspective.

The second limitation of this study was ensuring that I was obtaining in-depth, honest responses from the teacher participants. Throughout the process, I reassured participants about anonymity and encouraged them to respond honestly to questions; however, complete honesty could not be gauged. Furthermore, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without repercussion. The third limitation was researcher bias. This limitation forced me to remain open to feedback and use evidence from participants to answer the research questions instead of basing it on my own experience with PLCs. My status as a district leader within the same school district was the final limitation.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for changes with the implementation of and participation in PLCs. Since the district leadership at TISD has never formally evaluated the

administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs, implications derived from the study should aid them in improving the implementation of their participation in PLCs.

In implementing a PLC, districts should focus on collaboration. Administrators and teachers alike indicated the importance of collaboration by setting common goals to address teacher growth and student achievement, share research-based strategies, and grow team camaraderie. Integrating ideas that drive instruction is a vital element in the successful continuance of a PLC. Teacher learning and student achievement are increased when new information is given to PLCs. It acts as an influencer to increase learning and promote changes (Jones, 2013). Collaboration was also seen as a tool for a creative set-up of PLCs, working within the constraints of rural school systems, and being creative with PLC schedules and models. The analysis of administrator and teacher feedback demonstrated that participation in a PLC allowed them to collaborate in multiple ways, such as through reflection and collegial conversation. The collaboration and sharing of knowledge are vital and can contribute to overall school improvement, administrator and teacher relationships, and campus culture (Harmon, 2017).

Second, TSID administrators need more professional development in effective PLCs to turn around and provide professional learning to teachers so that everyone has a shared understanding of what high-quality PLCs should look, sound, and feel like. School leaders need to capitalize on their accomplished and distinguished teachers' knowledge and create PLC opportunities that allow those teachers to teach and model for teammates so that teacher growth can occur. Effective PLCs warrant inspiring teachers to have buy-in and take ownership of their learning (Long et al., 2019). Teacher growth, increased student achievement, and improved instructional practices need support beyond learning and work in PLCs. Follow-through and

follow-up with PLC content beyond PLC meetings need to occur between leadership and teachers, as well as among teachers.

Ultimately, PLC work and focus needs to positively impact student achievement, instructional practices, and professional growth. This impact could be achieved through teachers attending professional development. Allowing teachers to try new things and reflect on what did and did not work also promotes positive learning. Teachers working together to refine their teaching craft through input from teammates and built-in reflection time, for what worked exceedingly well and why, what could be improved and how, and what did not work, could also significantly impact overall culture and mindset and academic performance.

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings and limitations, I can make multiple recommendations for practical application and future research in this area. I based the recommendations upon an analysis of the perceptions of rural school administrators and teacher participants who participated in a PLC study in a rural school district in West Central Texas. Implementing and participating in an effective PLC requires that administrators and teachers have a common understanding of what a PLC is. It also requires that administrators design a PLC model that works consistently for their campus with sufficient time allotted to PLCs. Administrators and teachers design common goals toward the work to be accomplished, and administrators and teachers are actively involved and engaged in PLCs. Teachers are empowered to take ownership and share ideas and learning. Based on the study’s findings, there are four recommendations.

The first recommendation is to provide training and support for rural school administrators and teachers about the effective implementation and facilitation of PLCs. A comprehensive, ongoing, differentiated professional development series or conference would

benefit administrators and teachers. DuFour and Fullan (2013) stated that many leaders use the term PLC but do not implement the actions that participants of a PLC need to complete to be effective and achieve positive results. If monetary resources are an issue, then sending leaders with lead teachers would be necessary for foundational purposes. Those that attend could present the new learning to their community. This work could allow for future PLC planning to be more collaborative and supported by effective PLC research. According to Hipp & Huffman (2010), PLC implementation must be well-understood for teachers to "regard the PLC model as a viable and lasting option for school reform" and for administrators to facilitate the necessary work for teacher growth and student achievement (p. 12). Professional developments are also critical for school leaders. On campuses lacking strong leadership within PLCs, meetings are held, and discussions occur, but there are few actions and improvements in student learning; follow-through beyond PLC work is minimal (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

The second recommendation is to provide direction to principals to assist them with an effective PLC schedule that works with the campus master schedule. Researchers state that it is vital to PLCs that schools create and follow a collective commitment and allot time for the work (DuFour et al., 2016). Guidance and creativity need to be used to design a PLC model that lends itself to the specific needs and makeup of each rural campus.

The third recommendation is to provide professional development, support, and guidance to rural school administrators and teachers on common goal setting to support the school's mission and vision and guide PLC work toward set short- and long-term targets. An abundance of research on PLCs indicates that an organizations' mission, vision, values, and goals define the purpose of the work toward overall improvement and progress (Brodie, 2013; DuFour, 2004, 2014, 2015; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Easton, 2015).

Survey and interview responses from rural school administrators and teachers indicated that goal setting was a vital component missing within their PLC work. They should become a part of the implementation and participation processes of PLCs.

The final recommendation is to provide rural school administrators with guidance and support on distributive leadership. Although administrators expressed the need for teacher-led PLCs, their actions and feedback from teachers showed that they facilitated PLCs, planned PLCs, and led a majority of the PLC work, which goes against the teacher-led PLC concept. Distributive leadership is not about district or campus leaders, but rather about the community as a whole and utilizing the other leaders within the organization to fulfill the work's mission (Bolden, 20ll; McBrayer et al., 2018). When teachers assist with PLC planning, facilitation, and teaching, it instantly creates teacher buy-in and support for the work (Baloglu, 2012; DuFour, 2015). This type of work also promotes collegiality among administrators and teachers. DuFour & Eaker (1998) shared that In PLCs, "educators create an environment that fosters cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. xii).

Researcher's Reflection

I have been a classroom teacher. I have also been in multiple leadership roles within a campus, including as a campus principal. All of my campus-level leadership experience occurred in a larger school system, one with over fifty campuses. I have implemented, led, and facilitated effective PLCs that produce positive teacher growth, increased student achievement, and improved instructional practices in a larger school system. My passion for developing leaders and empowering administrators and teachers to use their various leadership strengths has fueled my desire to learn more about how to improve PLC work within a rural school system. I spent an

immense amount of time dialoguing with rural school administrators and teachers. All administrators were adamant about improving campus PLCs for the betterment of teachers and students. All teachers were unwavering in their support of improving PLC work and classroom instruction to increase student achievement and teacher growth. The dedication administrators and teachers hold to their craft in TISD is humbling and honorable, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have been able to interact with them to learn more about their perceptions regarding PLC implementation and participation.

Both administrators and teachers shared raw truth about what PLCs are like for them, regardless of the experience level of these leaders or teachers. They were honest about PLC experiences that caused them to share out PLC strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. Some weaknesses discouraged them. Furthermore, they answered all of the questions professionally and expressed appreciation for participating in the research study.

I worked conscientiously to minimize bias and exclude my personal opinions about PLCs. I am an educator and remember what it is like to be a teacher, teacher leader, and administrator within a PLC. I followed protocols and maintained the integrity of the survey and interview questions. I gained an abundance of knowledge from each administrator and teacher focus group. This experience reminded me why I chose to continue progressing in leadership and why I do what I do. This experience has also allowed me to delve deeper into a concept that I am passionate about and has the potential to impact rural school administrators, teachers, and students positively.

Summary

Through this single case study, I attempted to contribute further to the available literature on rural school PLCs. This qualitative study focused on rural school administrators' and

teachers' perceptions regarding the implemention of and participation in PLCs for teacher growth, increasing student achievement, and improving instructional practice. Findings indicated three main themes: collaboration, implementation factors, and positive outcomes. Each theme drew from administrator and teacher perceptions and branched out into multiple components and layers that impacted PLCs: working together, common strategies, common goals, strong and poor leadership issues, positive and negative teacher actions, student achievement, instructional practices, and professional growth. This study depicted how rural school administrators and teachers perceive the importance of PLC implementation and participation for teachers and student growth. An analysis of the interview data revealed that the administrators and teachers that participated in the study understood the importance of several PLC attributes that would benefit the campus community, them as teachers, and increase student achievement.

Implementing and participating in PLCs requires a detailed plan and intentional effort by administrators and teachers to be a successful team. I believe that one school had a much stronger PLC community than the other two. Ultimately, it was more robust because of the campus administrator's foundational knowledge about PLCs and the buy-in from teachers with the work. At this campus, the administrator empowered teachers to be active members of the group and pushed them to shine within their leadership strengths. Shared leadership needs to occur at all campuses, and a plan of action consisting of goals and action steps will guide leadership in achieving successful PLCs. Implementing and participating in PLCs also requires that administrators are facilitators of learning, active learners themselves, and that they analyze and reflect on their craft through student achievement.

The TISD schools have attempted to implement PLCs for a few years. With district leadership, campus leadership, and teacher turnover, it is time for new professional development

about PLCs and a plan to get them to where they need to be. The level of leadership experience with PLCs has also impacted PLC implementation. I conducted this qualitative single case study to examine administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs in a rural West Texas community. As a researcher and district leader, I am incredibly thankful to the administrators and teachers that willingly participated in the study. By permitting me to conduct the research, I gathered data that will benefit rural school education, other researchers, and PLC communities within my school district.

The results of this qualitative study complement other research on the significance of PLCs and fortify the notion that PLCs are also needed in rural school systems. It is critical to identify appropriate models that work effectively for rural school systems to benefit rural school leaders, teachers, and students just as much as urban areas do from PLCs. The results also reiterate the need to inspire administrators to be facilitators of learning, and for teachers to take ownership of their learning, build robust PLCs, and strive to do whatever it takes to improve self-growth and impact student achievement.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

April 24, 2020

Brenda Martinez
Department of Organizational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Brenda,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Professional Learning Community: Perspectives of Rural School Teachers & Leaders",

(IRB# 20-054)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Appendix B: School District Consent

April 14, 2020

Brenda 0. Martinez, Assistant Superintendent – XXXXX ISD
Doctoral Candidate at Abilene Christian University (ACU)

Dear Mrs. Martinez:

I commend you on your efforts to pursue an advanced degree in Organizational Leadership. Your dissertation entitled "Professional Learning Community: Perspectives of Rural School Teachers & Leaders" (conduct research at XXXXXX Elementary, Middle, & High School campuses) within XXXXX ISD has been approved.

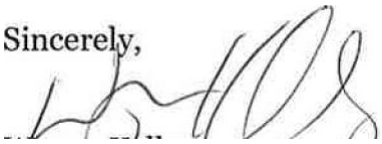
Your project will be coordinated through the office of XXXXXX XXXXX, Superintendent of Schools, via email at xxxxxxxxxxxxx or via phone at xxxxxxxxxxx.

Research participation of XXXXXX ISD employees isstrictly on a voluntary basis.

Approval of the research study does not mandate/require XXXXX ISD employees to participate.

Thank you for bringing this study forward within XXXXX ISD.

Sincerely,



Appendix C: Professional Learning Community Survey

This survey is designed to gather data about your level of understanding in regards multiple aspects of professional learning communities (PLCs).

1. **Rank your knowledge about PLCs:**
   Please rate your level of knowledge from 1 (no experience) to 5 (high-level of experience).

No Experience	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**High-level of Experience**

2. **What rating best describes your understanding of the effects of PLCs on:**
   Please rate each effect of PLC from 1 (no understanding) to 5 (high-level of understanding).

No Understanding	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**High-Level of Understanding**
No Professional Growth						Professional Growth
No Increased Student Achievement						Increased Student Achievement
No Improvement on Instructional Practices						Improvement on Instructional Practices

3. **What rating best describes your experience with the following PLC characteristics?**
   Please rank each attribute from 1 (negative experience) to 5 (positive experience).

Negative Experience	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Positive Experience**
Unproductive						Productive
Not Task Oriented						Task Oriented
Not Collaborative						Collaborative
Work is Not Applicable to Profession						Work is Applicable to Profession

4. **What is your interest in participating and learning in PLCs that focus on professional growth, increasing student achievement, and instructional practices?**
   Please rate your level of interest from 1 (no interest) to 5 (high-level of interest).

No Interest	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**High-level of Interest**

Appendix D: Administrator Interview Protocol

The researcher will introduce self and make sure all consent forms are signed. The researcher will review the issues for participants about anonymity and confidentiality.

Moderator's Introductory Commentary:

I would like to begin by reminding you that you have the right to withdraw, at any time, from the research project either during the interview or after it.
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project to explore the perception of rural school administrators regarding the implementation of and participation in professional learning communities (PLCs).

The purpose of this focus group interview is to collect your candid feedback about PLCs. There are no right or wrong answers. These interviews will be one-on-one with the researcher and interviewee. It is important that I understand and gather your viewpoint. Your interview feedback will not be used to evaluate you or your campus, it is simply to gather qualitative data for my research.

The interview will be recorded to assist with future transcription of data. This also ensures that I have an accurate record of your responses. The transcription of data will not reveal your identity. Your identity will be kept confidential as the results are analyzed. Your identity will be altered to an assumed name or number. Within the transcription I will disguise any information that may allow others to identify you.

All recordings will be kept in a locked drawer with no recognizable identification. Recordings will not be shared outside of ACU committee members.

Thus far, do you have any questions?

Professional Learning Community:

1. Let's discuss your campus professional learning communities.
    a. Would you describe your campus as being effective with professional learning communities? If so, what is the sense of connection within your campus PLCs? Please provide specific examples.
    b. How would you describe your campus culture?
    c. Does the campus culture support a professional learning community? Please provide examples of how this culture is supported or maintained.
    d. What values and goals are collectively shared amongst the teachers? What is valued most?
    e. Is collaboration easy or difficult on your campus? Please explain and provide examples.

2. Do you expect your staff to exhibit professionalism in their work?
    a. How would you describe the professionalism on your campus?
    b. Can you give me examples of how professionalism is shown by teachers on your campus?
    c. How do teachers show professionalism individually? How do teachers show professionalism collectively?

3. Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers towards collective learning. Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?

4. Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers towards professional growth. Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?

5. Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers towards increasing student achievement. Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?

6. Describe the strength of commitment by your teachers towards improving instructional practices. Please provide examples of this commitment as individuals and collectively. If this is not present, why do you think that is so?

7. What promotes or prevents your campus PLCs from functioning effectively? Please elaborate your response with examples.
    a. What are the connections and relationship types (personal, collegial, professional, and/or social) among your teachers and between teachers?
    b. What is the predominate relationship type between teachers and principal?
    c. Do the types of relationships amongst teacher within teams affect your campus PLCs?

8. If you were to characterize your professional learning communities, where would you currently be:
    a. Focused on students (student-centered) and high on knowledge-base for achieving high levels of success?
    b. Focused on school-wide improvement, concerned with learning and inquiry?
    c. Focused on a collective endeavor tied to a collective commitment to the organization's goals?
    d. If you would not characterize PLCs on your campus as any of the above, why not? Please explain.

9. Does your performance of teacher evaluation affect how you think about and approach your campus PLCs?
    a. If so, in what ways does your performance of teacher evaluation affect your thinking and approach to your PLCs? If not, why not?

   b. Does your performance of evaluating teachers make your PLCs more effective, weaker or have no affect? Why?

10. What effect do you think PLC participation has on:
    a. Professional Growth
    b. Increasing Student Achievement
    c. Improving Instructional Practice

11. What is needed to either implement or restructure PLCs on your campus to positively impact:
    a. Professional Growth
    b. Increasing Student Achievement
    c. Improving Instructional Practice

Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Guide

The researcher will introduce self and make sure all consent forms are signed. The researcher will review the issues for participants about anonymity and confidentiality.

Moderator's Introductory Commentary:

I would like to begin by reminding you that you have the right to withdraw, at any time, from the research project either during the focus group interview or after it. I will not pressure you to remain in the focus group.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project to explore the perception of rural school teachers regarding the implementation of and participation in professional learning communities (PLCs).

The purpose of this focus group interview is to collect your candid feedback about PLCs. There are no right or wrong answers. There will be up to 6 participants per focus group. You do not have to agree with others in your group. It is important that I understand and gather every participant's viewpoint. I will ask you to talk one at a time to ensure everyone's viewpoint is gathered within the recording. The interview feedback will not be used to evaluate anything that you say, it is simply to gather qualitative data for my research.

The conversations will be recorded to assist with future transcription of data. This also ensures that I have an accurate record of your responses. The transcription of data will not reveal your identity. Your identity will be kept confidential as the results are analyzed. Your identity will be altered to an assumed name or number. Within the transcription I will disguise any information that may allow others to identify you.

All recordings will be kept in a locked drawer with no recognizable identification. Recordings will not be shared outside of ACU committee members. Once recordings are transcribed and reviewed by ACU committee members, recordings will be deleted and only transcriptions will be available.

Thus far, do you have any questions?

What Is a PLC, Exactly? *(Schoology Exchange – Elizabeth Trach, 2019)*
Professional Learning Communities are groups of educators who work together to study learning standards and develop ways to improve student outcomes. These instructors work together to develop lessons and other initiatives, then they implement and test them to review how well they worked. Groups will use the information they gather during observation and discussion to adjust their instruction as needed. At their best, PLCs are collaborative and focus on inquiry and results. You may think of it as a laboratory approach to education: By observing problems and trying new solutions, educators experiment to find teaching methods that work best for their students.

We have 3 overarching sections for discussion. I may need to seek clarification from you prior to proceeding to the next question. Are you ready to begin?

1. When you hear the term 'Professional Learning Community'(PLC), what comes to mind? (Describe what a PLC is to you.)
    a. How does the idea of implementing and participating in PLCs at your campus make you feel?
    b. How important do you think implementing PLCs are to your professional field?
    c. Does the campus culture impact PLC implementation and participation?
        i. Professionalism amongst staff
        ii. High-value on teacher learning and reflection
        iii. Collaboration

2. What effect do you believe PLC participation has on:
    a. Professional growth
    b. Increasing student achievement
    c. Instructional practice

3. From your perception, what is needed to either implement or restructure PLCs on your campus to positively impact:
    a. Professional growth
    b. Increasing student achievement
    c. Instructional practice

Appendix F: Interview Coding Matrix

Research Overarching Question: What perceptions do rural school teachers and administrators have regarding the implementation of and participation in PLCs?		
Themes	**Categories**	**Evidence and Subcategories**
Collaboration	Working Together Common Strategies Common Goals	**Administrator Interviews:** - We need to work on building relationships so teachers feel safer in PLCs to collaborate - The safer teachers feel the more they will share with teammates - Collaboration will vary depending on the culture the campus principal sets for teachers - Collaboration is getting easier and is better - Teachers work and plan together - Teachers take ownership and call one another out when not following the norms - Teachers can speak freely with one another because of positive culture - Teachers will share more in smaller groups than in a whole staff PLC - Working together helps keep teachers on task within a PLC - Teachers are willing to try something new - Teachers like learning about and sharing research-based practices - Teachers intend to design and share strong lessons - Teacher led PLCs need to happen more often

		- How teachers treat each other impacts teacher participation in PLCs - How teachers treat each other impacts teacher performance - Goals are needed for effective PLCs and to help guide the work - Short-term goals needed - Long-term goals needed - Focused through goal setting **Focus Group:** - Collaboration - Working together - Makes me think of a set goal in mind - Coming together for student and teacher growth - Having goals that align to school and district goals - It's where we should talk about what is working and not working - We should strategize to address needs of students - PLCs represent coming and working together - Professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practice need teachers to be in the right mindset for collaboration to occur and change - Stop PLCs from becoming faculty meetings - Camaraderie is important for PLCs
Implementation Factors	Strong Leadership Issues Poor Leadership Issues Teacher Positive Actions Teacher Negative Actions	**Administrator Interviews:** - Working with a plan that keeps the end in mind as the focus is key to making PLCs purposeful - Use the data collected to help plan PLC topics - What I observe can help generate ideas and questions to present in PLCs

		- PLCs can be impacted by a leader's experience or lack of experience - PLCs are impacted by leadership actions - PLCs are impacted by leadership mindset - Expectations must be set for teachers and reviewed by the leader - Norms should be generated by the team and leader implemented in each meeting - PLCs are developing - Teachers look forward to coming together to learn - Teachers want time to process information with leadership and teammates, as well as with themselves through reflection - Teachers want to plan PLCs and present information - PLCs feel ineffective - PLCs only function in large group setting - No follow-through - No follow-up - Teachers are hesitant to participate - One size fits all PLC model does not work for rural schools; whole group versus small group - More like a staff meeting - Resistance at different points of the PLC process - Limited buy-in needs to change to buy-in over time - PLC work requires intentionality - Quality instructional materials - Reflection time needed - Look more at actions that impact teacher efficacy - Teachers need reflection time - Teachers need assistance with mindset work - More data-driven PLC work

		- Teachers need to talk about student performance in PLCs - Cannot allow teachers to fall into islands/isolation **Focus Group:** - Starts with leadership - It's important for teacher voice to be a part of PLC planning and work - There is no follow-through beyond PLC work - There is no follow up to see if things were implemented and worked beyond PLCs - Mandatory - Faculty meeting - Don't ever get to results - PLCs seem to be for keeping teachers on track administratively versus learning - In small schools PLCs functioning can be hard due to PLC set-up; can be an island type of feeling - There should be a focus given by leadership through guidance and task oriented - When culture is good, we can take risks and share ideas without fear - Time constraints exist that negatively impact PLCs, like no time to reflect - Professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practices are affected by not having goals - All teachers to work towards common goals - Schedules impact PLC implementation - Look at different models like whole group, team, and vertical meetings - Look at the number of times per month PLCs are held - Need to work further on alignment across grade levels

		- We need goal setting and a purpose for why we are meeting - PLCs need to be more focused - We need to know our expectations - PLCs should be designed to address different working groups and staff numbers - Rural school teachers wear many hats, they are not just in one role, so addressing all staff needs to be considered - PLCs are hard for rural schools, especially in secondary education where there may only be one teacher per grade level by content area - We need more energy and motivation; reboot session throughout the year not just at the start - We need activities to build our culture/team throughout the year **Administrator Interviews:**
Positive Outcomes	Student Achievement Instructional Practices Professional Growth	- Teachers need to continue to manipulate instruction and curriculum to meet student needs - Teachers need to try different things - Teachers take risks - Teachers are willing to help each other - Teachers have strong collegiality - PLCs impact professional growth - PLCs impact student achievement - PLCs impact instructional practices - Teachers request to attend a lot of professional learning - Teachers believe their own learning impacts student achievement because the improvement of their instructional practice

		impacts how they teach students - Teachers work together to improve their craft/skills - Teacher learn from one another which helps them teach better and impacts student learning - PLCs help build community - PLC focus on campus performance - Teachers take ownership of learning - Mindset has changed to growth mindset and one that is looking to grow - Teachers get excited to go to conferences - Commitment to increase student achievement is highly present by teachers - Teachers want to achieve - It's about student learning **Focus Group:** - Very important - Critical to advancing students' learning - When things are going well on campus then it positively affects students - Positive culture leads to positive outcomes - PLC implementation has a goal in mind around student success and student and teacher growth - PLC work allows teachers to bounce ideas - Teacher reflection is important - Reflection leads to feeling more comfortable to participate - Reflection allows you to pull from strengths and weaknesses - Reflection allows us to build off of one another - Teacher reflection leads to growth mindset - Positively impacts all 3 areas – professional growth, student

		achievement, and instructional practices - All 3 attributes (professional growth, student achievement, and instructional practice) impact building a positive community and are needed to give the most effective environment to students