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Pepperdine University

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A REFORM:  
IMPLEMENTATION, COMPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR  
SECONDARY SITE LEADERS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Jennifer Lynn Padilla

April, 2013

Christopher Lund, Ed.D. - Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

*This dissertation is dedicated to my father,*

*Alvin Lee Hopkins (1949-2003).*

*Before he passed away, I sat by him in the hospital room one afternoon and I told him,*

*“Dad – I’m going to write a book one day.”*

*He smiled at me and said,*

*“Baby, I’m sure you will.”*

*Well, Dad, here it is.*

*Even after all of these years, I still think of you  
and how proud you would be of me for finishing this.*

*I love you and miss you.*



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To my mother, Annabelle Hopkins and my sister, Marie Langley – thank you both for your support and patience as well. I know that I have been absent much while working on this. Mom, know that you were such an inspiration to me always.

I would like to thank others on a professional level – Mrs. Georgette Phillips ---for her belief in me as a teacher leader. Her encouragement and confidence in me is what started me on the administrative journey and first inspired me to look at Data Teams and Professional Learning Communities. If it had not been for her, and the opportunities that she afforded me as a teacher, it would have taken me much longer to branch outside of my English Language Arts classroom. I would never have facilitated the Smaller Learning Community Academies at my previous site, and I would never have met Dr. Jungwirth.

I would like to thank Dr. Linda Jungwirth for her encouragement to apply to Pepperdine University. Her passion about education and leadership truly inspired me. To all of my professors, including Dr. Lund, Dr. Purrington and Dr. Collatos, who were on this dissertation committee, you all are so very inspiring. I am grateful to have learned from you. To all of my other professors, all other colleagues and C-7 peers, my family and my friends, the truth is that there isn’t enough room on here to thank you all, but you all deserve it. **Thank you all** for supporting me, pushing me, listening to me, and helping me along the way. I could not have done it without **all** of you.

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## ABSTRACT

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have gained attention as an effective practice for supporting teachers and developing students since their inception in the early 1990s yet there is still work to be done in developing a blueprint for effective implementation in a pervasive culture of isolation and resistance, especially in secondary schools. While there is political, scholarly and practitioner interest in PLCs as a reform, few empirical studies explore the leadership implications of implementation.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experience of 6 secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to the implementing and sustainment PLCs at their sites. The purpose of this study was to glean the significant challenges and barriers faced by these sites as well as the effective strategies and tools to overcome those challenges as evidenced through the analysis and coding of 1-on-1 in-depth interviews with carefully selected PLC leaders.

9 themes emerged during the analysis. There were 6 themes under Research Question # 1: (a) PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores, (b) lack of communication and collaboration prior to PLC implementation, (c) resources of time and money, (d) overcoming staff resistance, (e) the importance of a Leadership Team, and (f) building relationships. There were 3 themes under Research Question # 2: (a) facilitating ongoing communication and celebration, (b) using professional development to promote PLC work, and (c) using common practices for PLCs.

The study's findings suggest recommendation of several leadership strategies and resources that secondary site leaders should consider when implementing PLCs at their own sites.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

Data-driven decision-making occurs when teachers and other site stakeholders collaborate around common formative and summative assessment data in order to inform their instructional practices. This concept began at the federal level, including recent legislation regarding the use of nationwide data and tracking systems for student progress from pre-k through college. While at the federal level, the emphasis is on using data to monitor educational institutions and effective practices nationwide, the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) focuses on using data in collaborative groups at the site level for the purpose of improving instructional practices. The federal government has earmarked funds for specific areas of improvement including establishing pre-K-to college and career data systems for the purpose of tracking progress and promoting continuous improvement (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Report, 2009). This policy is about career-ready standards and high-quality assessments with the purpose of getting all students ready for career or college.

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) (2001), and subsequently, *Title I, Part A*, present a focus on providing low-achieving students with academic support and learning opportunities to help master challenging core academic standards. *Title I, Part A*, the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) (2009) and *Race to the Top* (2011) closely tie the concepts of PLC-based decision making to the federal government through funding. These funds support additional instruction in reading and mathematics, as well as special after-school and extended year programs to reinforce the

regular school curriculum. Title 1 schools receive funds intended for these students, thus linking them to the accountability measures in place.

The New Democratic ideals in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) (2001) support legislation for the focus on standards. These legislative ideals involve increased accountability, an established comprehensive accountability system that requires schools and school districts to show results for all students including annual progress for low-performing racial and ethnic groups, state and district report cards, and public school choice. In addition, NCLB includes stronger professional development standards and training for teachers (Spring, 2010). Thus, NCLB has been a catalyst for the many policy changes present in the current ARRA and ESEA legislation.

NCLB requires states to establish academic standards for mathematics, reading, language arts and science. Schools are required to annually test students in grades two through eight for reading and mathematics. The tests are required in science during elementary, middle and high school and must be aligned with the states' academic standards (Spring, 2010). This focus on standards and accountability is what has brought data-driven decision-making to the forefront of education reform and funding.

In addition to the aforementioned political focus on standards, a sociopolitical movement in the 1980s, known as the *culture wars* contributed to the focus of current legislation on Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM). Spring (2010) asserts that there was a concern regarding the existing framework of multiculturalism and a general desire for all racial groups to receive help in the global economic race. One solution presented by Democrats and Republicans was to enforce each state to implement high standards and accountability systems in hopes that all children, regardless of his or her home

district, would receive an equitable education. The concept was that the adoption of rigorous standards would create equal opportunity and accountability to all students regardless of social or cultural backgrounds.

President Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas, largely pushed for equitable access to education in the 1980s. During his run in the presidential election he continued to make education a focus in his campaign, pushing for *Goals 2000* (1998), "...to help schools set high standards, and find the resources they need to succeed: the best books, the brightest teachers, the most up-to-date technology" (Spring, 2010, p. 39). Like Clinton, educational leaders and policy-makers who focused on uniformity of state academic standards and accountability held the assumption that standards would challenge students and they would then learn more. They held the belief that high academic standards would result in high academic achievement for all students.

President Barack Obama, has continued this reform rooted in his own beliefs about education. He has supported legislation that promotes NCLB, ESEA and Title 1 with The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). With ARRA, the government continues to fund schools in need of federal funds to maintain programs. The Guidance Report issued by the United States Department of Education asserts that ARRA makes Title I, Part A funds available and provides an *unprecedented* opportunity for educators to implement innovative instructional strategies in order to improve education and to close the achievement gap in Title I schools. It states that these additional resources for Title I, Part A will enable Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to serve all students and help increase the quality of the services (*Education*, 2009). Thus,

servicing all students and providing an equitable educational experience continue to be funding priorities at the federal level.

The increased accountability measures are problematic in that even with high standards, if schools are not adequately equipped with the necessary resources to instruct and assess, the adoption of standards alone will do little to improve academic achievement (Spring, 2010). As specified, the legislation has resulted in a federal focus of creating standards and meeting mandated progress as measured by state and federal tests. There has been little focus on how schools should allocate funds to programs, interventions, and professional development in order to ensure that students are meeting standards. United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan acknowledges that even with accountability measures and funding in place, there is still the need for adequate professional development in analyzing student data. Duncan asserts that stakeholders do not know how to analyze data, making it an *undecipherable code*, which impedes communication amongst educators, politicians and the community (Duncan, 2009). Duncan states that training all stakeholders and purchasing adequate programs to monitor achievement are integral to effective data-analysis models albeit costly and time-consuming for districts to implement and maintain.

Stakeholder collaboration and input are necessary for all students to succeed. According to Bender (2009), stakeholders must frequently consult with one another for any reform effort to work. Senge (1990) articulates a view of the workplace as a *learning organization* including the active participation of employees in creating a shared vision and culture to support collaboration so that they can work together more effectively in identifying and resolving problems (Feger & Arruda, 2008). Because of

this, Villarreal states that schools must be transparent in defining their issues, barriers and solutions so that transformation efforts can do this. He argues that transparency can be accomplished through the combination of the following four actions:

- (a) involving school personnel, parents and community in sharing ideas; (b) ensuring broader participation in the design of strategies and initiatives; (c) creating benchmarks and metrics to measure success; and (d) regularly and predictably sharing results with parents, the public, school personnel, state education agencies and the U.S. Department of Education. (Villarreal, 2009)

Periodically informing the community, parents, and other stakeholders regarding progress is also required to ensure transparency, equity, and positive results from the use of federal funds. Villarreal (2009) states:

Strategic planning is not only a necessity to ensure success, but also an ARRA expectation. Furthermore, strategic planning serves to: (a) define purpose, provide clearer focus and promote unity; (b) ensure transparency, sustainability, data-driven decision making and accountability; (c) build consensus and create a sense of ownership among stakeholders; (d) ensure that the use of resources is carefully planned and cost effective; (e) make certain that decision making is informed by a conscientious and well planned and managed evaluation system; (f) provide the glue that keeps the mission focused; and, (g) increase productivity for greater results and success for *every* student.

According to McGreevy (2010), through formula funding and competitive grants such as *Race to the Top* (2009), the federal government will provide assistance to the lowest performing schools in the state, as judged through standardized tests. In his



speech, Duncan (2009) asserts that it is not about mandates, but about systematically examining and learning and building on what we're doing right and scrapping what hasn't worked for our children. The result is a focus on educational innovation. While application of DDDM is still under construction, educators are beginning to develop questions around how teachers use data to drive instruction as well as whether the data around student achievement is linked to teacher effectiveness. The outcome is yet to be seen.

As previously stated, all of these data systems emphasize *state* data for the purpose of tracking students and maintaining summative assessment data instead of the timely immediate feedback that is essential to drive instruction – the kind of data that teachers, schools, and districts collect. Even with state standards, it remains to be seen whether accountability measures and funding will be used by institutions to increase student achievement. It may be that sites would more effectively use data at the school level if educators began to implement collaborative groups comprised of all stakeholders. If these groups used data effectively to drive instructional practices and develop systems of interventions for students, data-driven decision-making would actually be taking place. One way to accomplish this is through the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at the site level when educators use site data to drive their instructional practices.

In 2011, Sindy Shell, Ed.D., conducted an empirical study that identified several schools with successfully implemented PLCs. The study sought to identify the change attributes used by the school in implementing a PLC in a traditional school that yielded a sustainable program. Shell (2011) asserts that in order for the PLC to be effective, the

changes that took place in moving toward PLC implementation had to be *anchored in the culture* and begins with the leader. Shell utilizes a Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) and a Levels of Use (LoU) instruments to assess the levels at which several Los Angeles county schools, a smaller portion being secondary schools, utilized the practices of PLCs. The CBAM measures each site's response to the implementation of the PLC. As Shell states, the purpose of the study was to determine the necessary steps to properly implement a PLC that has *high levels of use* and *high levels of concern* in instructional practice.

Among the qualitative findings, Shell (2011) identifies four themes in regards to leadership and collective responsibility: (a) transformational leadership style is necessary to lead the transition from a traditional school model to a collaborative one; this leadership should be shared and supportive, (b) leaders should allocate resources in a way that supports collaboration, (c) staff should create explicit shared commitments, (d) collaboration and strategic planning should take place among teachers, and (e) the leaders should provide relevant and ongoing professional development.

Considering the role of the principal or PLC leader, Shell (2011) further concludes that the principal plays a compelling role in transitioning these schools to a culture of collaboration. She insists "...the leaders must be the driving force behind the PLC initiative and foster the belief that it can produce exceptional results if all the staff are willing to apply themselves" (p. 277). This focus on the leader's role in implementation suggests that further research should be conducted to determine exactly how a principal goes about being the transformational leader that fosters PLC implementation and sustainability.

## **Statement of the Problem**

As evidenced in the following chapter, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have demonstrated to be a useful means of increasing group effectiveness within organizations. Since their inception in the early 1990s, they have gained attention as an effective practice for supporting teachers through collaboration and communication, professional empowerment, and continuous professional development. They have received credit for developing students with more time and support and more meaningful staff-to-student relationships. However, there is still work to be done in developing a blueprint for effective implementation in a pervasive culture of isolation and resistance, especially in secondary schools. While there is political, scholarly and practitioner interest in PLCs as a reform, few empirical studies explore the leadership implications of implementation. Therefore, there was an opportunity to investigate the implementation of PLCs by six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to (a) the reasons for and rationale behind implementation; (b) the processes, strategies, tools and resources used during implementation; (c) the significant barriers and challenges faced during implementation; and (d) the effective leadership strategies used to overcome presented challenges and barriers.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to the implementation and sustainment of PLCs at their sites. The purpose was to investigate the implementation and sustainment of PLCs by six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to (a) the significant barriers and challenges faced during

implementation, (b) the leadership strategies used to overcome presented challenges and barriers, and (c) the leadership strategies used to sustain the PLC over time.

### **Research Questions**

There were two broad phenomenological research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?
2. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region sustaining PLCs at their sites?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study built upon two theoretical frameworks: (a) Social Capital Theory, and (b) Reflective Practice. These theoretical frameworks were used throughout this study. The interview instrument was based on the theoretical frame in addition to the Professional Learning Community resources discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the collected interview data was tied to the theoretical framework in an attempt to explain how the data is was interpreted.

**Social capital theory.** Psychosocial scholars have considered social capital in examining the union of trust and civic engagement (Bourdieu, 1998; Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2008; Muntaner, 2004; Portes, 1998). Bourdieu asserts that social networks are not inherent and are only possible when individuals have personally invested in the collective, have formulized strategies to institutionalize the group's dynamics, and are aware of the benefits of being part of the network. Social capital is similar to human capital; it is presumed that individuals invest in the network with an expected return - some benefit to the individual where the combination of the individual returns also

benefits the collective (Lin, 2008). Lin et al. (2008) describe social capital as when individuals interact and collaborate in order to *produce profits*. It facilitates the flow of information, influence on the stakeholders through social ties, added resources beyond personal capital, and provides identity reinforcement and recognition.

There are three components to social capital theory as defined by Lin (2008). These are (a) structure, (b) accessibility, and (c) action orientation. Lin further defines social capital as the resources embedded in a social structure, which are accessed and/or mobilized in *purposive actions*. Putnam (1995) defines social capital as, "...the virtuous circle of civic engagement and interpersonal trust – that act together to allow citizens to pursue joint social objectives" (p. 666). It is a *reciprocal relationship* between said civic engagement and trust (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Muntaner (2004) claims it increases the sought after productivity due to the creation of, "... norms, networks, trust & other cultural relations" (p. 676). Norms, trust and other properties such as authority and sanctions of a group are essential in the production and maintenance of the collective asset (Lin, 2001). The benefits are accrued to individuals by virtue of their deliberate participation in social groups (Portes, 1998).

**Reflective practice.** John Dewey (1933) introduced the underlying concepts of *reflective practice* which inspired scholars and writers to further explore the concept and its boundaries (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 1985; Kolb, 1984; Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001; Schön, 1983). Reflective Practice is centered around the concept of lifelong learning where in a self-regulated process, the practitioner reflects and analyzes their own experiences in order to

consciously learn from them (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Boud et. al, 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 1985; Kolb, 1984; Rolfe et al., 2001; Schön, 1983).

Schön (1983) introduces concepts such as *reflection on-action* and *reflection in-action*. He writes, “Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. It is working with experience that is important in learning” (Boud et. al, 1985). When an individual uses reflection in action, she essentially thinks on her feet – connecting her knowledge, previous experiences, thoughts and feelings to attend to the situation. When she uses reflection on action, however, she then analyzes her reaction to the situation and explores the reasons around, and the consequences of her actions. Kolb (1984) refers to this process and developed a model that includes such reflective practice where information is transformed into knowledge. This process is continually applied to experiences. Gibbs (1988) discusses *structured debriefing* to facilitate this type of reflection. His *Reflective Model* also includes description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions, and then a personal action plan.

Argyris and Schön (1978) pioneered an organizational reflective practice known as *Single Loop Learning* and *Double Loop Learning*. *Single Loop Learning* results in a practitioner using the same policies and procedures in action even after they fail. However, the *Double Loop Learning* practitioner modifies personal objectives, strategies and policies in order to avoid repeating the same errors again which requires the employment of a new frame or systems. Thus *Double Loop Learning* involves the uncovering and remedy of error. It requires a critical analysis that may then lead to a modification of the existing variables and, therefore, an alteration in the way approaches

and results are framed. *Double-loop* learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the alteration of an organization's existing norms, policies and purpose.

### **Importance of the Study**

While there is existing literature regarding the theories behind, the argument for, and the steps to implementing a PLC at a school site, few studies have been conducted to describe the lived experience of secondary site leaders as they encounter the challenges of implementing PLCs. Although this study is unique to the participants, it will add to the existing body of literature about the process and challenges of implementing PLCs at the secondary level.

Results of this study may help inform leaders and leadership training programs, which focus on components of PLC structures, and leadership behaviors that initiate implementation and create sustainability of such reforms. This study will also contribute to the existing body of literature on PLC reform efforts and creating a culture of collegiality at the secondary level.

### **Delimitations**

This study will be delimited to six high schools within six districts in two counties in Southern California. Participants in the study interviews will be delimited to site administrators including principals, assistant principals and other PLC members who assumed a leadership role in the implementation of PLCs at their site.

## **Limitations**

This study will focus on the lived experiences of secondary site leaders during PLC implementation. Therefore, applying the findings to another subgroup should be done so with this in mind.

1. This study is limited in scope to six leaders at the secondary level within the geographical area of Southern California. Generalizations beyond the experience of the six leaders may not be a representative sample of all leaders.
2. Although quality of instruction and the use of formative summative assessments are important in a PLC, the focus of this study will be on the concept of creating a culture of collaboration and inquiry; the quality of the assessments and their effectiveness will not be measured.
3. The in-depth interview structure limits the study to the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the individuals interviewed.

## **Assumptions**

1. Site leaders will respond honestly to all interviews, and questionnaires. Dishonest or inaccurate responses would not give a true representation of the effective implementation practices of PLCs.
2. The approached site leaders will be willing to participate in the study in an effort to share their personal accounts and perceptions.

## **Organization of the Study**

This study is written in five chapters. The first chapter provides the background, statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical frameworks, importance of the study,



delimitations, limitations and assumptions as well as the key terms. The second chapter is a literature review that synthesizes the historical, contextual and political dynamics surrounding PLCs in addition to empirical studies related to the implementation, sustainment and noted benefits that they provide. The third chapter presents the study methodology, including the setting, subjects and instrumentation to be used. The fourth chapter reveals the results of the study. The fifth and final chapter includes a discussion of findings, conclusion and recommendations for further research.

### **Key Terms**

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).** AYP is a measurement of academic performance and progress of individual schools. It is a main component of the *Public Schools Accountability Act* (PSAA) passed by California legislature in 1999. These scores can range from 200 points to a maximum of 1000 points. Each school's growth is measured by their progress toward specified point goals based on student assessment scores on standardized exams. The AYP generally looks at the rate of student participation in taking the exam, the overall percentage of proficient and advanced students, as well as the number of proficient and advanced students within each subgroup.

**Best practices.** Best practices are *what works* in instruction; they are research-based approaches to instruction.

**California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).** The California High School Exit Exam is a state-mandated exam for all 10<sup>th</sup> graders -in the state of California. This test must be taken and passed for both English Language Arts and Mathematics, with a score of 350 or higher. The purpose of this exam is to, "...assess whether students who

graduate from high school can demonstrate grade-level competency in the state content standards for reading, writing and mathematics” (About the California High School Exit Examination, 2010).

**California Department of Education (CDE).** The California Department of Education is the agency responsible for Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR). Their primary function is to lead and support educational institutions in the continuous improvement of student achievement, specifically in regards to closing achievement gaps (California Department of Education, 2010).

**California Standards Test (CST).** The California Standards Test is an assessment as provided in Education Code section 60642.5 that measures student achievement of the state content standards.

The exam scores are reported based on five performance levels are used for reporting the CSTs and CMA (grades three through five only) results: advanced; proficient; basic; below basic; and far below basic. The state target is for all students to score at the proficient level or above (advanced). The percentages of students scoring at each performance level are reported by grade and subject for all students and for student subgroups. (Standardized Testing and Reporting, 2009)

**Collaborative leadership.** There are many terms for this style of leadership including *shared leadership*, *distributive leadership*, *facilitative leadership*, and *service leadership*. These forms of leadership involve the shared responsibility and decision making of all stakeholders in an organization. This form of leadership strays from the traditional top-down model and involves *energizing* and enabling individuals in the

organization to make good decisions and do better things (Fullan, 2006).

**Data-driven decision-making (DDDM).** Data-driven decision-making is the use of student assessment data (formative and summative assessments) to measure student progress on mastering state standards. “DDDM in education refers to teachers, principals, and administrators systematically collecting and analyzing various types of data, including input, process, outcome and satisfaction data, to guide a range of decisions to help improve the success of students and schools” (Marsh, Payne, & Hamilton, 2006).

**Data teams.** *Data teams* are groups of educators who use a model of data-driven decision making to guide instruction. In teams, educators use test data to identify academic areas for improvement and to evaluate instructional strategies. Marsh et al. (2006) state that, “District and school staff should consider taking an inventory of all assessments administered to identify whether they serve a clear purpose, are aligned with state standards, and provide useful information” (p. 11). In data teams, teachers collaborate around common formative and summative assessment results to drive their instructional practices. These assessments can include unit, quarter, semester, district benchmarks, and state testing data.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).** The ESEA was first enacted in 1965 and was reauthorized in 1994. It encompasses Title I, which is the federal government's aid program for disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

**Essential standards.** Often referred to as *power standards*, these are standards deemed *essential* by educators. They are, “...prioritized standards that are derived from a systematic and balanced approach to distinguishing which standards are absolutely

essential for student success” (Ainsworth, 2003, pp. 1-2). A group or committee made up of school and/or district educators usually completes this process.

**Formative assessments.** Formative assessments are “...ongoing assessments, reviews, and observations in a classroom” (Fisher, 2007, p. 4). Teachers use these assessments to improve their own instructional methods, guide their next steps, and provide student feedback throughout the teaching and learning process. The use of formative assessments in PLCs involves the use of collaboratively created assessments.

**Lived experience.** In action research, the phenomenological aspect of investigating the human experience – the viewpoints, beliefs and interactions of the people involved, constitute the lived experience. “Sociologists now generally recognize that emotional processes are crucial components of social experience” (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). For the purpose of this study, the researcher described the lived experience of the site leaders involved in the implementation of a PLC.

**Local educational agencies (LEAs).** LEA is used to refer to public school districts or any body that oversees multiple schools. The responsibilities of LEAs includes operating the school system, distributing funds to schools, and contracting for educational services (Glossary of Information, 2011).

**No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** This is the standing law covering K-12 educational policy. *The No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) was signed into law by President George W. Bush on Jan. 8, 2002. It is a reauthorization of ESEA, the central federal law in pre-collegiate education. NCLB legislation articulates requirements for public schools in America and expands the federal role in education aimed at improving education for disadvantaged students. There are a number of measures designed to bring

considerable gains in student achievement and to hold accountable states and schools for student progress. These measures include: annual testing, academic progress goals, school report cards, higher indicators of qualifications for teachers, funding changes, and a focus on reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

**Pacing calendars.** Otherwise referred to as *pacing guides*, pacing calendars are teacher-created instructional calendars where essential standards are broken down and grouped by academic quarters, determining which standards should be taught at a given point during the school year. Teachers use these calendars to plan their instruction.

**Professional development.** Professional development includes trainings and certifications provided by a site or district to train or inform instructors about happenings. According to the National Staff Development Council, the term means "...a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (NSDC, 2009).

**Professional learning community (PLC).** While there are many definitions of PLCs, according to DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008), a PLC is:

...a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (p.14).

PLCs work under the assumption that all stakeholders collaborate around academic achievement for all students.

**SMART goals.** SMART goals are goals that are agreed to by all stakeholders relating to student achievement. They follow specific criteria; they are *specific, measurable, attainable, realistic* and *timely* (DuFour et al., 2008).

**Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR).** STAR includes the California Standards Tests (CSTs); the California Modified Assessment (CMA); the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA); and the Standards-based Tests in Spanish (STS). Four CSTs are required for all students including English–Language Arts (ELA) for grades two through eleven, Mathematics for grades two through nine, Science for grades five, eight, and ten (life science), and History–Social Science for grades eight and eleven.

**Student achievement.** Student achievement refers to grade-level mastery of standards as measured by the California Standards Test (CST) and the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

**Summative assessments.** Students complete summative assessments at the end of a unit, course or school year to measure mastery. They come in the form of state tests, district benchmarks or classroom unit tests to measure competency. The data collected from these assessments is used to gauge progress toward goals and benchmark standards for a course or grade level (Fisher, 2007).

**Title I.** As part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I refers to specific funding aimed at improving the academic achievement of disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

Researchers and scholars identify Professional learning communities (PLCs) as an effective practice for supporting teachers and developing students. The review of the literature explores the historical, contextual and political dynamics that create challenges and opportunities for PLCs to be implemented successfully. During the research process, the author consulted a combination of hard copy and internet based sources –including journals, peer-reviewed articles, periodicals, books, manuals, legislative documents, political speeches, theoretical sources, and empirical studies to gather a comprehensive review of PLCs. This chapter reveals the critical nature of implementation in a PLC, specifically the systems approach to implementation through an exploration of the relevant literature in four areas: (a) political and historical contexts, (b) creating a culture for change, (c) key barriers in implementation, and (d) tips for site leaders to overcome challenges.

The first section includes a review of the literature regarding the history of reforms and policies surrounding the formation of PLCs including empirical research about existing models and benefits. Building on this foundation, the second section includes theoretical literature about creating a context or culture for the PLC. This includes articulating a shared vision, including developing a vision, developing a plan around that vision, and the ongoing process of inquiry that follows. The third section includes a review about how reforms can create a context for change, including a discussion about school culture and the leadership role in creating and sustaining that culture. The fourth, and final section, reviews the literature on the key barriers in PLC implementation as well

as effective strategies for leaders to overcome them, including checking progress and providing assistance where needed.

### **Problem Statement**

PLCs are just one of the many educational reforms since the inception of American public education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the micro and macro issues in education. The American education system has been influenced by theories and political agendas including *Progressive Education Reform*, and the *Excellence Movement* (Spring, 2010). Consequently, there are mixed reactions to these reforms. There are arguments that these reforms, especially the *Excellence Movement*, simply called for an amplification of existing practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Spring, 2010). Part of the movement only called for schools to do more of what they were already doing including adding on more school days to the calendar year, making school days longer, assessing students more often, and expecting more in the teacher credentialing process, but otherwise, did not contain any *new ideas* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Researchers argue that these educational reforms merely contained prescriptive and top-down initiatives including the creation of uniform national and state curriculum standards, standardized testing and reporting for tighter accountability, school choice, and professional development (King & Newman, 2000).

Unlike its predecessors, the ongoing *Restructuring Movement*, which took roots in the 1990s, includes recent legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), and the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) which seeks to offer more sweeping reform options. These reforms have fostered an increasing focus on addressing lagging Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores, lack of funding, as well



as cultural and demographic disparities in learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). PLCs seem to be about more than just improvement of current structures; they suggest a total *redesign* and *systemic transformation* of school sites. While there is not a consensus about the reform that would serve public education best, it is widely accepted that our current system of public education is not serving all students. Arne Duncan, current U.S. Secretary of Education, laments over the fact that 25% of American students drop out of high school, and less than 50% of those who graduate, earn any type of secondary degree. In regards to California specifically, especially the Los Angeles area, he revealed that in 2010, out of the district's 866 schools, 72% did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and under NCLB law, approximately 60% of Title I schools, were labeled as *in need of improvement*. He ended with a call to action: "...with America slipping further behind other countries, we cannot stand still any longer" (Duncan, 2011, p. 1). In short, public education has seen many attempts to address complex issues yet a concrete and sustainable solution to these problems has not been identified. Spring (2010) states that individuals with liberal viewpoints assert that the problem is not just schools, but that poverty and society contribute. In contrast, scholars and politicians who are more conservative, assume that schools just will not do what is necessary to improve.

Researchers argue that these reforms have failed to bring about lasting change (DuFour et al., 2008; Spring, 2010). In addition to the overwhelming complexity of the task, DuFour et al. (2008) asserts that the reasons so many previous reforms have failed are due to impractical expectations, unclear anticipated results, lack of focus and perseverance to see them through, and a failure to acknowledge and address the change process. He boasts that the PLC model has proven successful in helping schools and

districts to overcome these barriers, especially concerning attending to that change process in order to achieve and maintain real results (DuFour, 2009). In addition, King and Newman (2000) contend that there are multiple factors aside from high standards that affect student achievement including: (a) the efficacy of leadership; (b) the quality of instructional resources, including equipment, and technology; (c) the institutional features such as size, time for instructional planning, and autonomy; (d) the instructional climate; (e) the types and amount of community and parent support; and (f) the amount of funding. In other words, every school is different - national policies, standards and assessments are not the only answers to addressing the unique problems that school sites face.

### **The Historical Context and Political Reforms Behind PLCs**

Recent legislation, including president, Barack Obama's blueprint for the ESEA, focuses on improved teacher efficacy as one solution to these problems. Researchers maintain that the teacher quality is crucial in student learning and that the interaction between teacher and student is a main determinant of student success (DuFour, 2009; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The research supports that teachers are graduating from certification and preparation programs that are not preparing them for the work they will be doing in the classroom (Levine, 2006). Once in the classroom, they do not receive meaningful feedback or professional development, nor do they receive adequate recognition or respect for the work they do. In addition, they point out that schools are not structured or led in a way that allow teachers to share expertise and learn from each other. Instead, they are stuck in a tradition of isolation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2009; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schmoker,

2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Hence, the obstacles of isolation, poor evaluation and professional development practices are a focus for improvement in existing legislation.

The ESEA plan to address these concerns includes holding teacher preparation programs accountable. It involves funding for relevant and research-based professional development. It boasts plans for increased funding for collaboration time, mentoring and working on improving instructional practice. The plan claims that it will respond to teachers' voices by sharing responsibility, advocating for collaboration, and using data-driven decision-making (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). It also claims that it will focus on improving principal leadership, including holding them accountable as instructional leaders. Even as funding decreases in many areas, there is still a federal focus on improving teacher quality and efficacy. As several programs are defunded (Klein, 2011), ESEA continues to promise funding for teacher education and professional development.

One variable of student achievement is instruction. Scholars posit that teachers and instruction are important to student learning – that instruction is the utmost determinant of learning despite factors such as socioeconomics or funding levels (King & Newman, 2000; Schmoker, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). A study conducted by Mortimore and Sammons (1987) found that compared to all other factors combined, teaching had 6 to 10 times more impact on student achievement.

Although quality of instruction most directly affects student achievement, the value of instruction is not solely determined by the quality of the teacher in the classroom. The quality of instruction is also determined by the merit of the adopted curriculum, the

effectiveness of the pedagogy used to deliver it, and the quality of the assessments used to measure mastery. Furthermore, the *school's* capacity directly affects instruction. The school's capacity consists of the constancy of the school curricula and the strength of the entire school community, as well as the knowledge, ability, and character of the individual teachers. School capacity is also affected by district, state, and federal policies and programs, which dictate student school assignments, the selection of curricular standards and assessments, as well as the teacher certification, evaluation, and professional development processes. Therefore, addressing school reform in a restructuring sense is necessary in order to address the whole structure – the whole *system* that contributes to the quality of instruction that every student receives. This requires the input and collaboration of all stakeholders to conduct an autopsy of the current structures and systems in place in their individual schools (Hord, 1997; King & Newman, 2000).

In the literature that criticizes the current structure of traditional schools, there is a call for a shift to a *systems approach* to school improvement – a shift from the current culture of isolated classrooms and independence toward *systems thinking* which calls for *interdependent relationships* among all staff members. It requires a focus on creating systems that promote the continuous enrichment of the whole organization (DuFour, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Many, 2009; Schmoker, 2006). The shift cannot be prescriptive or initiated as a top-down approach. In other words, because each school is unique socially, culturally and politically, with teachers and students who differ in capabilities and dispositions (all of which influence instruction) this restructuring of schools' interdependency will to vary from school to school (King & Newman, 2000). Restructuring cannot be accomplished through a predetermined recipe for

implementation. Each site's restructuring will depend upon the professional community of learners that initiate it. Researchers see the PLC structure as a realistic, affordable, route to better instruction that honors such diversity (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The concept of PLCs has been around for some time and is largely attributed to the works of Senge (1990, 1995), Louis and Kruse (1995), Hord (1997), and DuFour et al., (2008). Researchers use a variety of terms to describe the collaborative organization of schools: *collaboration* (Noas, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1999), *collegiality* (Barth, 2001; Little, 1991), *professional community* (Louis et al., 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), *discourse communities* (Putnam & Borko, 2000) *professional learning community* (DuFour et al., 2008; Hall & Hord, 2001), *culture of experimentation, self-monitoring team, communities of continuous inquiry* (Schmoker, 2006), *schools that learn* (Leithwood, 2002) and *communities of practice* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The term most widely known however, is *professional learning community* and has gained considerable attention by professional organizations and proponents of reform.

The concept of PLCs is rooted in the work of Senge (1990) who views the workplace as a learning organization. Throughout the learning process, the employees actively participate in creating a shared vision (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Senge, 1990) and a culture that supports collaboration on identifying and resolving problems (Feger & Arruda, 2008). Thus, a considerable amount of this chapter focuses on creating and sustaining a vision for student success through the collaboration and inquiry that is consistent in the literature despite the term used to label it.

Organizations such as the National Staff Development Council (2010) have included learning communities in their *Standards for Staff development*, highlighting them as a

strategy for improvement of schools and professional development (Feger & Arruda, 2008). John Hattie (2009) conducted over 800 meta-analyses on factors that influence student achievement. He concluded that the most effective method to improve schools was to organize staff into collaborative teams. These teams should clarify essential learnings for students as well as what evidence of mastery the team will collect for continual analysis together so that they can deduce which instructional strategies are working and which are not. In other words, he encouraged schools to function as PLCs.

As mentioned in the ESEA blueprint, part of the solution to the teacher efficacy concern is a simple concept that involves using existing resources – collaboration of all stakeholders. In his March 22, 2011, speech at the United Way of Greater Los Angeles Education Summit, U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, made a call to action for *tough-minded collaboration* of all educational and community members in regards to educational reform. In the business sector, Covey, (2004) claims, “Once people have experienced real synergy, they are never quite the same again; they know the possibility of having other such mind-expanding adventures in the future” (p. 269). High levels of collaboration - strong-teamwork across all grade levels – is one of the nine characteristics of high performing schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

In the early 1990s, Shirley Hord coined the term, *Professional Learning Community* yet it was further developed and championed by Dr. Richard DuFour. Researchers have attributed PLC success to the emphasis on *learning* more than *teaching*, on working collaboratively, and on holding educators accountable for results (DuFour, 2009; Muhammad, 2006). PLCs have gained considerable attention since superintendent, Richard DuFour implemented his PLC model at Adalai Stevenson High School in

Lincolnshire, Illinois. The PLC model has become progressively popular in the American education system and there is pervasive agreement among researchers and practitioners that this is the most promising way to restructure and improve schools (DuFour, 2009; Eaker & Keating, 2009).

### **What Are the Key Components of PLCs?**

Due to the fact that Richard DuFour et al. (2008) and Shirley Hord (1997) are hailed as the experts of PLCs, this literature review relies heavily on their definitions of the components of PLCs. DuFour et al. (2008) asserts that there are six essential characteristics of PLCs while Hord establishes five essential components. Additional relevant literature cites either the work of DuFour et al. (2008) and Hord (1997) or coins varying terms for similar concepts. Although there are different labels, the components of each category are similar. For the purpose of synthesizing the various terms and definitions of each, the researcher compiled the literature into the following three overarching categories which the research indicate are key components of successful PLC implementation: (a) a commitment to accomplishing shared goals for student learning; (b) a collaborative culture; and (c) continuous inquiry, action and reflection. The additional subcategories as defined by DuFour, Hord and other researchers have been included in each broader category.

**A commitment to accomplishing shared goals for student learning is paramount.** A fundamental aspect of PLC formation requires articulating a shared vision that drives what schools do. Written statements themselves never change anything but the discussion surrounding them engages people in dialogue about hopes and aspirations, which helps them to find meaning in the statement. These collaborative

efforts motivate and energize people, create a climate for positive change, and give a direction to the stakeholders with specific standards of excellence (DuFour et al., 2008) and mutual accountability.

*Vision* is a term used to refer to *mission, purpose, goals*, and objectives. Business experts, educational reformists, and researchers have different terms for it: *vision, mission, values, goals, purpose*, and *focus* to name a few (Burnette, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Many, 2009; Newman, 1996). However, they all essentially have the same definition. Put simply, a vision is a declaration of the ultimate purpose of the organization including its goals, acceptable evidence of achievement, and specific action steps to accomplish them. When an organization has a vision, they also have clear and *shared norms, shared values, and collective commitments* (Bender, 2009; Burnette, 2002; DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

The concept of articulating a shared vision is paramount in the implementation of a PLC because the vision becomes the focus that drives everything a PLC does, both individually and collectively. Covey (2004) explains the impact of such a statement. He explains, "... (it) changes you because it forces you to think through your priorities deeply, carefully, and to align your behavior with your belief" (p. 129). Therefore, in an educational community, an adopted vision should begin with a clearly identified problem (Doerr, 2009), focus on student learning with clear essential outcomes and be specific to the community's needs. Doing so provides the organization with a clear direction or purpose (DuFour, 2009).

It is not enough to have a clear vision unless it is focused on the right issues and *begins with the end in mind* (Bridges, 2009; Lee, 2010). In the literature, the recurring



theme of a clear and shared purpose in PLCs focused on student learning or a *curricular-focused vision* (DuFour et al., 2008; Reichstetter, 2006). It articulates the *what* and *how* of instruction – stakeholders clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that all students must acquire (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Many, 2009). According to DuFour et al. (2008), this team dialogue should be centered on three critical questions: (a) What is it we want our students to learn? (b) How will we know when each student has learned it? and (c) How can we improve on current levels of student achievement? These questions are important because they keep the actions in line with the focus on learning. It is important to note that regardless of the academic vision, a belief that all stakeholders must embrace is that *all* students *can* learn – that they are academically capable because only then can staff imagine classrooms and instruction that support each student’s potential achievement (Hord, 1997). Researchers assert that unless staff truly believes that all students are capable of achieving agreed-upon goals, the statement itself, is useless and hollow (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 1997). Only when this is a shared belief, can there be a commitment to helping all students learn at high levels (Hord & Sommers, 2008; NSDC, 2010).

It has already been established that the vision must be focused on student learning, but it also needs to be specific to the essential standards and acceptable products of mastery. The key elements include establishing a clearly identified academic problem to collaborate on, staying focused on the problem during collaboration, and then sharing and appropriately differentiating responsibility and mutual accountability (Doerr, 2009; Many, 2009). Furthermore, Hord and Sommers (2008) assert that a PLC should stay focused on outcomes but stay open on *how* they get there. Goals should contain

indicators, timelines, and targets that do not prescribe the methods of attainment (DuFour et al., 2008; Many, 2009). The methods will vary by individual as well as by PLC team.

Since the PLC community articulates the vision, they are responsible for identifying the site's needs. This requires an honest assessment of the current reality – or facing the *brutal facts* of reality (Collins, 2001). As Hord (1997) explains, in a PLC, teachers have the opportunity to formulate academic goals in terms of their own classrooms and their particular students. As staff begins to share their own personal visions they begin to develop a shared one that is based upon *trust* and *mutual understanding*. This is no easy task. It requires all stakeholders to acutely examine where they are and where they want to be. Schools that have successfully implemented PLCs began with a vision that answered this initial question: What would a learning mission for all students and adults *look like* if we really meant it (Eaker & Keating, 2009)? Once that is established, every action that they take should help to actualize it – it ought to become what progress is continually measured against (Collins, 2001). As Hord and Sommers (2008) explain, the vision is continually under construction during the process of dialogue in the PLC. This requires a culture of collaboration.

**PLCs foster a collaborative culture.** The theme of collaborative decision-making is a key component of school reforms, professional development, and PLCs. A recurring theme is that no reform has lasting sustainability if it derives from a top-down mandate (DuFour et al., 2008; King & Newman, 2000). Even the president of the United States testifies to this concept. In a recent speech regarding public education, he states, “We need to reward reforms that are driven not by Washington, but by principals and teachers and parents. That’s how we will make progress in education – not from the top-

down, but from the bottom up” (Obama, 2011). The concept is the same for the creation of a vision. For a vision to be shared, it has to be created collaboratively – with *all* stakeholders involved – it requires a collaborative culture (Many, 2009). There should be shared and supportive leadership (Burnette, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008), *collegiality* (Little, 1991), *egalitarianism* (Haberman, 2004), and *shared expertise* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000)

In collaboratively creating the vision, it becomes a product of a synergy of efforts (Collins, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This undertaking requires a transparency about intentions, goals and accountability, (DuFour et al., 2008; Many, 2006). In this process, it becomes *visual, shared* and *owned* by all stakeholders, breeding buy-in and commitment (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Stakeholders should work interdependently (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and should be involved in its development as well as the utilization of that vision as a guidepost in decision-making (SEDL, 2001). There should be opportunities for all staff members to influence the school’s activities and policies (King & Newman, 2000). Wegner and Snyder (2000) assert that communities of practice organize themselves, set their own agendas, and establish their own leadership within these collaborative groups. They hold each other mutually accountable for attaining goals (Doerr, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998), deprivatize practice (Louis & Kruse, 1995), and model practices and procedures (Haberman, 2004).

In order for this to be the norm, a PLC must have a *climate of trust* (Doerr, 2009; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, S., 2001) and a *sense of community* (Haberman,

2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995) with *supportive conditions* (Hord & Sommers, 2008). In a PLC, members, root for one another's successes (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

**Continuous inquiry, action and reflection follow implementation.** It is important to state that collaboration alone will not bring about lasting change. It will result in improvement unless staff are focused on the proper issues (DuFour et al., 2008). Organizational leaders, both educational and otherwise, recognize that organizations need to work together on the *right things* in order for collaboration to be effective and that effective management *puts first things first* (Covey, 2004). This requires an autopsy of the organization, its mission, visions, values, procedures and processes - a confrontation of the *brutal facts* (Collins, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). Once the honest assessment is complete, and the organization has a clearly defined purpose and goal, they begin to work collaboratively on the action steps to achieve it, including best practices about teaching and learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Hord (1987) explains that a PLC framework is not just working together on carefully identified tasks but also includes supporting that work through careful study and learning of relevant subject matter. In other words, the process is never-ending; as the community evolves, so does their vision - the overarching mission of improving student learning, however, does not. Kanold, Toncheff, and Douglas (2008) claim, "When the adults in the school no longer ignore poor student performance, professional learning communities' energy produces a laser focus on collective adult action for students not able to exhibit the required knowledge. Interventions for student success become the norm" (p.24). The idea is that as they are focused on the right things, they continually grow and learn professionally throughout the process.

***Committed action is continuous.*** It is not easy to set a meaningful goal and even harder to accomplish it. Unfortunately, plenty of well-intended plans have gone undone. Hord and Sommers (2008) reflect that:

One of the enduring problems in many schools is the lack of a consistent focus or direction for improvement. These schools are burdened by too big a plateful of programs and processes that teachers never learn to use productively, so they never reach implementation. (p. 49)

However, the PLC does not have to be at the mercy of its surroundings; it can take initiative to attain shared values and purposes (Covey, 2004). Successful organizations realize that there will be difficulties but they have a foundation that guides them through the change because they preserve their core values and purpose while their strategies and practices continuously adapt as necessary (Collins, 2001). There is a culture of experimentation (Schmoker, 2006) which includes high productivity (Haberman, 2004), active research (Schmoker, 2006), and collaborative inquiry (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Burnette, 2002). This requires action; it requires *learning by doing* (DuFour et al., 2008). The *doing* - any action - should be aligned with the vision which evidences the commitment to the common goals (Garnston & Welmann, 1995; Hord, 1987). Only then is the *doing* going to make a difference. The concept of *learning by doing* is a form of *reflective professional inquiry* (King & Newman, 2000). Team members use reflective questions about concerns about the school community, determine processes to address the issues, gather data to measure the problem and solutions and then keep track of the process and outcomes. These questions are significant, manageable, clearly stated, unambiguous, self-reflective and neutral because they are

driven by data (James, Milenkiewicz, & Buckman, 2008). PLCs continually check progress (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schmoker, 2006); and collect and implement evidence and strategies (DuFour et al., 2008).

In a PLC, there is a commitment to learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and to continuous improvement (Many, 2009). PLC members are continuously learning together (Hord & Sommers, 2008) in an iterative process (Collins, 2001). During this process, there is an honest assessment of students' levels of learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and stakeholders collaborate to learn together about a topic the community deems important (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson & Hammerman, 1996). There is a results-oriented focus (Hord & Sommers, 2008) with SMART goals (Burnette, 2002; Many, 2009). Staff observe one another (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and engage in a regular schedule of formal meetings (Schmoker, 2006) where they collaborate around common assessments (Many, 2009; Schmoker, 2006) and plan for interventions (Many, 2009). There is reflective dialogue (Hord & Sommers, 2008) and reflective professional inquiry by staff members (King & Newman, 2000). Staff analyzes assessment results and encourage the use of data (Many, 2009). They assess based on results rather than intentions (DuFour et al., 2008) and candidly clarify current instructional practices. The process is one that requires analyzing and applying (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) – practically applying what they have learned to their work (Haberman, 2004; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

## Why Implement a PLC?

While there have been many studies conducted in regards to PLCs, as pointed out by (Feger & Arruda, 2008), there are few empirical studies that “...move beyond self-reports of impact” (p. 12). Thus, the impact beyond educator’s perceptions is not fully measureable. However, based upon qualitative data and self-reports, there are several noted benefits of PLCs in existing literature. These include benefits for students as well as for staff.

**How do PLCs benefit students?** There are several noted benefits of effective PLC implementation in regards to academic achievement and behavior associated with PLCs. The benefits fall into four categories: (a) more time and support, (b) academic gains, (c) meaningful relationships, and (d) improved attendance and graduation rates.

*Students receive more time and support in learning.* It is assumed that staff involved in PLCs provide timely assistance with support as soon as it is evident that a student is having difficulty. Furthermore, students are then *required* (rather than invited) to utilize the additional time and support. For students, regardless to which teacher they are assigned, such interventions are a well-coordinated, methodological, multi-tiered plan to ensure their learning (DuFour, 2009; Many, 2009). The plans are similar to the concept of the Response to Intervention (RtI) approach to interventions (Bender, 2009). In PLCs, there is a large shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on *learning* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Because efforts are ensuring that students learn, rather than ensuring that teachers are teaching, students are more likely to receive interventions and supports. In a PLC, having taught something is no longer enough – all educators must make sure that the students *learned* what was being taught.

A study conducted by Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) reviews another study conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools. Their findings compared the study of 820 secondary schools and 11,000 of the students enrolled in them. There were several positive outcomes reported including evidence that students were engaged in high intellectual learning tasks and that they learned more. These positive outcomes include: (a) students experience academic gains; (b) students form meaningful relationships; (c) school attendance and graduation rates increase; (d) PLCs foster a culture of collaboration and communication; (e) PLCs professionally empower, renew and inspire staff; and (f) PLCs foster continuous professional development.

*Students experience academic gains.* While there are few quantitative studies to support academic gains, according to supporters of PLCs, students whose schools are formed into PLCs experience greater academic gains, especially in math, science, reading and history. Studies show that PLCs result in smaller achievement gaps and improved achievement scores over time (Burnette, 2002; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lee et al., 1995). Teachers set higher expectations and the quality of their classroom pedagogy is considerably higher (Louis & Marks, 1998). In a study conducted by McLaughlin & Talbert (1993) over a three-year period, the three strongest PLC high schools showed steady improvement on the SAT-9 assessments, exceeding the growth trend of other area schools. Another noted long-term benefit is that articulation across grade levels provides a more seamless transition for students from one grade level to another, distributing learning more equally, and making students more prepared as they advance (Adams, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lee et al., 1995).



Being part of a PLC means that even when students do not perform well or when they get behind on their assignments, the teacher continues to offer ways to help them. This can take the form of a variety of interventions such as small-group tutorial sessions or peer tutors from among those students who have mastered the material. For PLC teachers, giving up on a student is not an option. It includes being a *cheerleader* for students, telling them to persevere despite difficulty (Marzano, 2011). This not only helps students to master academic material, it also helps to build relationships.

***Students form meaningful relationships.*** It has been established that teacher to student relationships are a significant catalyst for success. In related literature, positive relationships between teachers and students are one of the most commonly named variables related to effective instruction (Haberman, 2004; Hord, 1997; Marzano, 2011). It appears that if the relationship between teacher and student is strong, the instructional strategies are more effective. When students feel connected with their teachers, who respect and value them, the teachers are able to make a difference in their lives (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Marzano, 2011). When school staff is organized into PLCs, more students are likely to experience meaningful relationships with staff (Hord & Sommers, 2008). In their empirical study, Louis and Marks (1998), assert that in PLCs, students can depend on the help of their teachers in achieving high learning goals. Such positive relationships tap into some of our most basic needs as human beings – to belong and feel valued (Maslow, 1954).

***School attendance and graduation rates increase.*** Studies have shown that students whose teachers are part of PLCs cut class less often and the overall dropout rate for these schools is lower than non-PLC schools (Hord, 1997). A Tennessee high school

was recently spotlighted for its reform efforts. Werner (2011) reported that even in the, economically disadvantaged neighborhood, graduation rates at the school have risen impressively in just three years. Another example is Adalai Stevenson High School which is well known for its effective implementation of PLCs, broke every achievement record on the school, state and college entrance exams, earning a ranking among the top 20 schools in the world , over a 10-year period (Schmoker, 2006). These schools are a testament to the power of PLCs in helping students to be successful.

**How do PLCs benefit staff?** There are several noted benefits to school staff. In addition to the realization of better test scores and improved student behavior (Adams, 2009), these benefits fall into three categories; (a) a culture of collaboration and communication; (b) professional empowerment, renewal and inspiration; and (c) meaningful and continuous professional development.

*PLCs foster a culture of collaboration and communication.* The very nature of PLCs requires a high level of communication and collaboration amongst faculty. This results in a likelihood that teachers will be better informed (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Being part of a PLC supports powerful learning that articulates the components of good instruction and classroom practice. This ongoing inquiry and learning creates new knowledge about teaching and learners. The focus on common essential standards which are aligned with state assessments, provide a *guaranteed and viable curriculum* (Schmoker, 2006). Due to the collaborative nature of PLCs, teachers experience reduced isolation and a *sense of community* along with a increased sense of efficacy and motivation (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and *shared responsibility* for the development of all students (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Just as students need meaningful relationships –

need to feel that they belong – so do teachers need colleagues to help keep them focused and motivated.

As teachers grow within the PLC, and beginning teachers continue to receive systematic assistance, they increase their ability to support one another – they learn to build on each other's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses (Little, 1991). This systematic coherence sets up new teachers for success by providing structure and continuity (Adams, 2009). Overall, staff collaboration results in superior solutions to instructional problems (Little, 1991), staff can solve problems more quickly (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and they can lighten individual loads because teachers become specialists, essentially driving problem-solving (Adams, 2009). Instead of being *another thing* to do, PLCs actually make the workloads lighter and are *social* which is the best kind of accountability (Schmoker, 2006).

***PLCs professionally empower, renew and inspire.*** Teachers whom are part of PLCs make significant progress in adapting instruction for students more quickly than in traditional schools (Hord, 1997). Researchers claim that being part of these collaborative groups fosters a commitment, motivation and vigor in working to achieve the mission and make lasting change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Energy and enthusiasm that contributes to achieving the vision infuses staff with a higher morale and support of each other and increased confidence among faculty (Little, 1991). The result of the increased confidence in self-efficacy is a professional renewal where teachers *feel inspired to inspire students* as they find more meaning in their content areas and better understand the students in their classrooms. Teachers are empowered to focus on their own strengths and help each other in solving problems more efficiently, creating

new knowledge and opinions about teaching and learning (Adams, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Such a community honors and empowers teachers and their intelligence (Schmoker, 2006) boosting morale, and confidence and reduces staff absences (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

*PLCs foster continuous professional development.* In a PLC, professional development is personal and applicable through the observation and adaptation of instructional approaches in order to meet the needs of real students both *thoroughly* and *systematically* (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The continuous inquiry ensures reflection on instruction and results (Schmoker, 2006). This approach to professional development results in powerful learning as it builds knowledge base and technical skills, increases effectiveness, creates a deeper understanding and meaning to content areas, and fosters an appreciation for vertical articulation of skills and competencies. All of this helps teachers to help students to achieve higher standards while identifying areas of weakness in their own instruction (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Ongoing and collective learning results in an expanded collection of ideas, materials, and methods (Little, 1991) and a transfer of best practices (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Thus, in a PLC, professional development is both ongoing and relevant. Teachers select the appropriate professional development in real-world settings, then implement and reflect on it.

### **What Are the Optimal Conditions for Creating and Sustaining a PLC?**

For a school to constitute PLCs, a *culture of collegiality* is necessary (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Many (2009) warns, “Becoming a PLC is not something you do; it is something you are” (p. 8). PLC schools are characterized by caring relationships where staff work together and change their pedagogy in pursuit of achieving their vision. All

stakeholders are committed to the mission and work collaboratively to strengthen it (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Just as students are expected to show evidence of their work, Fullan (2006) proposes that the effectiveness of leaders in PLCs should be judged on how well leaders are able to create the necessary culture of professional learning system-wide. For the purpose of this study, the following synthesis of literature focuses primarily on the creation and fostering of a cultural environment necessary to implement a PLC.

**What is culture?** Culture is a concept commonly associated with the concept of ethnic and nationalistic identities. It is a term used to define a complex combination of abstract concepts and concrete objects that are unique to a group of people. In regards to organizations, including educational institutions, Schein (2004) defines it as a *dynamic phenomenon* that is "...constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior, and a set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior" (p.1). There are specific elements of culture within an organization including (a) artifacts, (b) espoused beliefs, (c) values and underlying assumptions, and (d) climate (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). There are several different terms for each of these concepts, thus this literature review synthesizes each. Each category contains a definition and examples of each element within a PLC context.

***Artifacts are visible elements of culture.*** Simply put, artifacts are tangible products of individuals or organizations. In organizations, they include visible structures and processes, observable behaviors patterns, formal rituals and celebrations, and embedded skills (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). They are the most concrete products of any culture.

In a PLC, the artifacts – the products of the teams - include ongoing reflective dialogue, professional growth, and support (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Little, 1991; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). There are visible associations and partnerships beyond the school that are sources of learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), and staff is continuously engaged in collective learning and its application (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Artifacts are the physical evidence that the professionals in the organization are engaged in continuous learning and reflection. One way to gauge the level of implementation of a PLC is by creating a portfolio of artifacts and work products. Examples of artifacts created by such a community include (a) documents, (b) PLC meeting products, and (c) protocols.

*Documents.* Examples of documents from PLCs include pacing guides or calendars, common assessments, rubrics, lists of essential outcomes for each grade level in reading, writing and math, and SMART goals. Effective PLCs have a pyramid of *systematic, timely and directive interventions* when students do not learn and they develop strategies to enhance and broaden learning for those who reach proficiency (Many, 2009). Additional artifacts include compilations of research, common lessons, and common units (Schmoker, 2006). These physical products document the work that is being done.

*PLC meeting products.* Effective PLC teams convene at least bi-weekly for a minimum of 45 minutes in meetings that are focused on instruction and assessments (Schmoker, 2006). During these meetings, the staff discusses their practice and shares their instructional knowledge (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Artifacts can include agendas, meeting minutes, norms of collaboration, evidence of data analysis (including data

generated by common assessments), evidence of how it is presented to each teacher and the team conclusions and strategies for improvement (Many, 2009). One can sit in on these meetings and observe the professional collaboration that is aimed at improving instruction in every classroom.

*Protocols.* A team adopts procedures and sets of rules for interaction. Protocols can include a blueprint of how teams are organized, how work is monitored and supported, as well as a description of systematic provisions of time for intervention/enrichment. The idea is that there is evidence of protocols that promote the efficient and effective analysis of data (Many, 2009). A noted catalyst for launching PLCs includes protocols for teachers visiting, observing, and giving feedback to one another. There are procedures established and staff learns the questioning strategies of inquiry and continuously practices them in their classrooms; they pair up and visit each other to give feedback and root for one another's success (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The protocols are the *way things are done* to support the PLC vision.

*Culture includes espoused beliefs and values drive cultural actions and decisions.* When something is *adopted* or *married* to, it becomes *espoused*. Examples of espoused beliefs and values include the, goals, philosophies, norms, strategies and rules upon which members base their every decision and action. This is visible through the root metaphors and imperative symbols that serve as a basis for all decisions (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). At the heart of the espoused beliefs and values in a PLC are (a) the shared mission, vision and values, (b) collective responsibility, and (c) shared and supportive leadership.

*Shared mission, vision, and values.* In a PLC culture, these shared beliefs and values are aligned with the vision that is created collaboratively. An essential component of PLC culture is inclusive school-wide membership in the shared beliefs, values and vision (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006) because without involvement of all stakeholders, there is no commitment (Covey, 2004). For staff to believe in the vision, it has to be personal. It requires a shift from the characteristic competitive culture of schools into one of *collegiality*. This starts with the *soul* of staff, asking them to be introspective and to verbalize and communicate a personal vision of teaching and learning (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). Expectations should be high and effective instruction should be seen as a *matter of life and death* (Haberman, 2004). Once this is established, the responsibility to take action and adhere to it becomes collective.

*Collective responsibility.* A team shares common goals and collectively allocates the rewards and responsibilities for accomplishing them – the members willingly put aside their individual needs for the greater good of the group (Lencioni, 2002). This builds organizational capacity evidenced by the following:

The most successful schools functioned as professional learning communities, where teachers helped one-another, took collective (not just individual) responsibility for student learning, and worked continuously to improve their teaching practices...offered more authentic pedagogy and were more effective in encouraging student achievement. (Hord, 1997, p. 31)

When a staff is collectively responsible for student learning, they work together to improve instruction by questioning, researching, analyzing, developing, testing, and evaluating new strategies and beliefs that support student learning (DuFour & Eaker,



1998). Some scholars describe this as *collegiality* (Little, 1991), or a *community of practice* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) where members share a problem or passion and continue adding to their existing knowledge and skills through regular interaction (James et al., 2008). At some point, PLC teams establish *collective responsibility* as the new norm (Peters, 1987; Wagner, 2004; Wise, 2004). In collective responsibility, teachers, “... learn to exercise their individual knowledge, skills, and dispositions to advance the collective work of the school under a set of unique conditions” (King & Newman, 2000, p. 82). Furthermore, responsibility is shared among official and informal leaders (Phillips, 2003). As campus professionals, all stakeholders study the available literature and research reports to become informed about the latest and most influential teaching and learning strategies to enhance their learning and practice. In addition to small teams within a school, it is necessary for the whole school staff – administrators and teachers - to meet regularly and frequently (at least once a month) to address school wide goals and staff’s learning (Hord & Sommers, 2008; SEDL, 1998).

***Underlying assumptions are not visible but are strong.*** Beneath the surface of missions and visions, lie unseen but very powerful assumptions that affect the decisions and actions of staff (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). These assumptions include unconscious, taken-for granted beliefs, perceptions, habits of thinking, mental models, and feelings. It includes embedded and acquired knowledge, patterns or shared assumptions, linguistic paradigms, and shared meanings. This aspect of culture may not be as tangible as artifacts are, but they show in everything an organization does, because *everything* an organization does is based on a network of hidden assumptions (Zander & Zander, 2000).

One can examine the underlying assumptions of an organization by looking at the ethical beliefs that shape their decisions and actions. Shapiro and Gross (2008) explore the different ethical paradigms that make up an organization. An educational institution's assumptions should be based upon the *Ethic of the Profession*, which entails the acceptable standards of the profession, and appeals to the ethics of the community -the personal and professional codes -honored by educational leaders and organizations (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Therefore, being professionally ethical means that the underlying assumptions place students at the center of all decisions. As many researchers assert, the most fundamental underlying assumption that drives any educational organization should be *that all students are capable of learning* (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hord, 1997; Many, 2009).

***Climate can be felt.*** An organization is unarguably made up of individuals. These individuals affect the climate of an organization. Climate encompasses the people or human factors and the way the people *feel* about the ways things are done (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). Despite the merit of any reform, several authors reflect on the importance of considering the people that make up the organization because they, being the ones who change, provide the most effective route for accomplishing systemic change— acting separately and together (Fullan, 1993; Hord et al., 1987) .

A climate that is conducive to the forming and sustaining of a PLC is founded on *mutual trust* (Grossman et al., 2001; Stoll et al., 2006) *mutual respect* for one another (Haberman, 2004), *mutual understanding* (Hord, 1997), and *openness* (Kruse et al., 1995). These productive relationships are fostered by a climate of reflection, porosity, and transparency (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Only then can *synergy* happen. As Covey

(2004) writes, “The essence of synergy is to value differences – to respect them, to build on strengths, to compensate for weaknesses” (p. 263). This is why there is so much emphasis on the cultural aspect of organizations. Culture effects climate and vice versa. If people do not trust, respect and deal candidly and openly with one another, there is no chance to build a culture of collegiality and collaboration (DuFour et al., 2008).

One must consider the *Ethic of Care* paradigm of Shapiro and Gross (2008) considering climate and promoting a positive one. When doing so, a leader will question how structures and policies will help or hurt people. They will be concerned with building or hindering staff morale. They will consider if it will create rifts among staff. They will consider the community response and what conflicts may arise. Quite simply, although there is little relevant literature about creating a climate conducive to PLCs in books, articles, and journals, it could possibly be one of the most important. As Covey (2004) asserts, “Increasing the driving forces may bring results – for a while. But as long as the restraining forces are there, it become increasingly harder” (p. 280). In other words, one must tend to the organization’s climate and take heed to the feelings of the individuals in it in order to ensure the crucial cultural shift that can survive in it. Leaders must aide the individuals to make the psychological redirections that they must make if the change is to work (Bridges, 2009).

*Education needs a cultural shift.* As discussed earlier, a current culture of isolation persists on school campuses, especially at the secondary level. While it has been established that teacher quality is important to student success, it should also be noted that in addition to teacher quality, school culture has a significant effect on student learning (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In order for PLCs

to take root system-wide, “...(Reform) will require a new culture with new expectations – and an encounter with the brutal facts at the district and state levels. Success and clarity here may be our best hope for success at the national – and perhaps international – level” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 149). Due to this fact, educational leaders have a tremendous responsibility to initiate and sustain that change.

### **Key Barriers and Complications in Implementation**

Despite the popularity of PLCs, researchers argue that they are *under-conceptualized* (Westheimer, 1998) *confusing*, a *mismatch* with traditional models of practice and provide *little guidance for practice* (Furman, 1999). Most studies tend to focus on existing groups, therefore there is limited know-how about creating bonds or how to maintain PLCs as they work through arising conflicts (Grossman et al., 2001); there is a need for more empirical research (Westheimer, 1998). High schools especially face several unique challenges in PLC implementation. McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) conducted a 2-year intensive study of high schools involved in a school-wide implementation of PLCs. Out of 10 high schools, 3 were identified with strong learning communities. Even then, as consistent with broader literature, the high schools involved in this study were found to be weaker than the elementary schools on all measures used. Some of the barriers include the complex organizational structures with department boundaries found in secondary schools. Additionally, due to the demands of running a high school, principals often function more as managers than instructional leaders. Adding to the challenge, there is often a culture of low expectations of students and is further complicated by common student disrespect for staff (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007). Wells and Feun (2007) expound that there are also problems moving past the

pervading culture of isolation because when teachers come together to form PLCs, there are often concerns about developing common assessments due to differences in philosophy, style, and content. The following are common themes among the barriers and obstacles for implementation. They are not in any specific order: (a) ambiguity regarding implementation procedures, (b) inadequate professional development and a history of isolation, and (c) conflict that arises with change.

**There is ambiguity regarding implementation procedures.** It has already been established that there is no specific checklist or recipe for PLC implementation. While there is a significant amount of existing literature, a small amount of it discusses actual strategies and approaches whereby school staffs might develop into PLCs (SEDL, 1998).

**Professional development and a history of isolation persist.** Professional development has four dimensions: (a) teacher's knowledge, skills and dispositions; (b) the strength of the school-wide professional community; (c) the consistency of the school programs; and (d) the school's capacity (King & Newman, 2000). However, current professional development systems often present information that the staff deem as irrelevant so they do not apply it to their classrooms and instruction. It is usually comprised of short workshops, conferences or courses without follow-up or feedback (if it even reaches implementation). Professional development and is often dictated top-down without input from teachers and the facilitators are often outside experts and consultants who use outside materials without integration into existing resources (King & Newman, 2000).

**Change and conflict are inseparable.** A good leader recognizes that even with planned change comes conflict, and conflict is uncomfortable. As Bennis (1989) warns,

“Make whatever grand plans you will, but be prepared for the trivial and unexpected to interrupt them” (p. 42). However, while a leader cannot eliminate conflict, they can manage it. One measure of a leader is how well they can encourage the tolerance of diversity among staff and invite differences in opinions. An effective leader can facilitate staff in learning from one another while managing conflicts that arise (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

### **The Leadership Role in PLCs**

Although leadership in PLCs should be shared, due to the current structure of schools, school administrators face the challenge of helping staff to experience the benefits of a culture of collegiality (Little, 1991). Leaders who want to transform their schools into PLCs must change the routine practices of the individuals within the schools. Only when staff understand and can evaluate the implications of an improvement initiative are they able to commit to sustaining the effort. Therefore, leaders have an awesome task of moving individuals and teams from intentions to action (Burnette, 2002).

A common theme found in the literature emphasizes the importance of *shared* and *supportive leadership* (Doerr, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Reichstetter, 2006; Schmoker, 2006). The title of *leader* is usually associated with the administrators charged with supervising and managing. However, as Zander and Zander (2008) state, “A leader does not need a podium; she can be sitting quietly on the end of any chair, listening passionately and with commitment, fully prepared to take up the baton” (p. 76). Therefore, an educational leader can be any staff member who takes on the task of decision-making functions through shared leadership (Elmore, 2000; Hart, 1994;

Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Neufeld & Roper, 2002; Poglinco et al., 2003; Spillane, Halversob, & Diamond, 2011). These leaders can take the form of crisis management team members, teacher leaders, instructional coaches, coordinators, department chairs, or others (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Regardless of who takes up the baton, there is a need for leadership throughout the school at all levels (Spillane, 2006), and opportunities for staff to influence the activities and policies of the community (King & Newman, 2000). In a PLC, administrative leaders accept this shared power and decision-making with teachers – they build collegial relationship with teachers, and promote and nurture the development of leaders at all levels (Hord, 1998).

**How does a leader develop a PLC?** Logically, individuals seek linear, sequential procedures or checklists of indicators in order to tackle this complex task of PLC implementation. However, a school does not become a PLC by advancing through a checklist but by tapping into the capabilities and commitments of the individuals within it. Leaders must bring those commitments out of individuals by tapping into their emotions, appealing to basic human needs of achievement, belonging and significance (Maslow, 1954). Thus, the culture must tend to individual needs within the organization (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Some ways to begin the movement forward include (a) be creative with what is already in place, (b) acknowledge staff concerns, (c) establish a purpose, and (d) lead with the right questions.

***Be creative with what is already in place.*** In the case of many successful PLC implementations, there was an existing external force in the form of a program or funding (SEDL, 2001). There was already momentum or a change occurring. In others, the school's mission and previous programs were already aligned with the concept of PLCs.

The idea is to avoid the overburdening of new initiatives –by aligning with what is already in place. One way to do this is to link to existing school, district, and state programs. Aligning with their requirements and expectations can help avoid creating extra work, working, “...*smarter, not harder*” (Burnette, 2002, p. 54). There are also existing informal networks of individuals who already possess the ability and passion to develop the organization into PLCs. A leader should identify the people who can build core competencies and help them to come together (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

It takes creativity to initiate and implement any program. Leaders will have to be creative with time, encourage experimentation and collectively brainstorm new answers to old problems (Bridges, 2009). Because implementation is not prescriptive and every site is different, leaders must be innovative in how they create space and time for collaboration - how they introduce PLCs and become part of it *with* the staff. Leaders will also have to be creative in how they equip teams, including soliciting external support for essential resources such as funding, technical and political support from all levels of federal, state and community partners (Hord, 1997). After all, the community of learners should extend to the literal community.

***Acknowledge staff concerns.*** Transition begins with an ending - a letting go of something. Leaders have to assist stakeholders in letting go of the *old reality* and *old identity* of the site before collaboration can become the new norm (Bridges, 2009). Leaders should use both verbal and written agreements to assure staff that PLCs are not going to harm them. They should make it clear that being part of a PLC will not require them to work beyond their contractual duty hours. He or she must state that results from exams will not be used in formal evaluations, nor will they be shared with others. Lastly,



leaders should assure staff that they would be able to retain a significant degree of autonomy in regards to their instructional strategies and methods. Leaders must acknowledge that they will not be prescriptive about how to achieve goals but rather ensure that the staff uses the vision as a guidepost in making their shared decisions. Lastly, an effective leader will allow staff to select topics for study and collectively decide how to apply it. It should be noted however that dialogue, persuasion, and consensus will not always be enough. There will be times when leaders have to use the power of their positions to get people to act (DuFour, 2009) and get people *on the bus* (Collins, 2001).

***Establish a purpose and direction.*** A recurring theme in the literature is the need to clarify and often revisit the purpose of the organization (Bridges, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008). In order for a leader to *sell* the problem that is the catalyst for the change, the staff must first see, acknowledge and understand it. Only then will the possible solutions become theirs (Bridges, 2009). Once a case for change has been made, a leader should facilitate the creation of guidelines and procedures to ensure purpose and direction. He or she should enact collective inquiry on teaching and learning by facilitating the creation of group norms, and SMART Goals (in regards to student achievement). Some successful schools have contributed to the development of a purpose and mission by visiting other PLC schools, readings books and articles, and engaging in regular discussion (Hord, 1997).

***Lead with the right questions.*** A good leader leads with questions; not with answers in order to articulate a shared vision and develop a plan (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Researchers claim that leaders should ask the following four questions of all

stakeholders: (a) Based on existing data, what are the weaknesses and strengths of our students' performance? (b) How does our current curriculum align with state standards and tests? (c) What makes this school such a good school? and (d) What can we do to make it an even better school? (Burnette, 2002; Lee, 2010). Asking such questions will result in a collaboratively generated assessment determining what the needs are and how the formation of PLCs and professional development might address those needs.

Beginning with questions, helps to create a climate of dialogue and debate, instead of coercion where the truth can be heard. PLC members are able to *conduct autopsies of their organization without blame* (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Once PLC teams have been established, three critical questions should be used as a tool for focusing efforts and building common vocabulary: (a) What do we want students to learn and what evidence will show they have learned it? (b) What will we do when they do not learn it? and (c) What will we do to enrich learning for those who have learned it? (Burnette, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lee, 2010).

**How does a leader sustain a PLC?** Once a site has adopted PLCs as a way of being, the leader must continue to support teams and equip them to identify and solve problems for continuous improvement (Schmoker, 2006). Supportive conditions consider physical and structural factors as well as human factors that contribute to lasting sustainability (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

***Provide physical and structural supports.*** Leaders must tend to the staff, equipping them with the necessary resources for the work. They must provide the infrastructure that will support and enable teams to apply their expertise (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). This includes providing and protecting schedules and structures that

reduce isolation and promote effective communication school-wide such as physical proximity of teachers (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Many, 2009; Reichstetter, 2006). Supports take the form of cultivating school policies and structures that foster collaboration. Examples of this include creating time and space for teachers to convene (built into the master schedule) during the regular instructional day. It involves providing mentors and providing applicable staff development to staff so that they are prepared to engage effectively in collaborative work (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Reichstetter, 2006).

***Tend to relational factors and human capacities.*** In a PLC, the leaders essentially have two jobs - to be the *lead learner*, and to develop other leaders (Tichy, 1997). In order to do so, leaders must nurture the human capacities demanded by PLC work. They must help staff relate to one another, including providing socialization activities for staff members to connect with one other on a personal level in a caring environment (Hord & Sommers, 2008). This requires leaders to: (a) communicate and collaborate; (b) coach and model; (c) monitor; (d) reward, recognize and celebrate; and (e) stay the course with courage.

***Communicate and collaborate.*** Communication is more than just written memos and informative briefs at faculty meetings. It is imperative that leaders recognize, as Hord and Sommers (2008) state, that "...ultimately, communication is the message others receive, not the message we think we are sending" (p. 33). McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) encourage the development of communication, common language and collaboration across department boundaries. It can take the form of meetings, minutes, announcements, notes, emails, circular notes, or newsletters. Leaders should give people

information over and over again (Bridges, 2009). It is important to establish structures for feedback as well. Lines of communication should remain open, becoming a sharing of information with democratic participation at voluntary regularly scheduled meetings - at least once a month (SEDL, 2001). An effective way to assess the value of the community is to listen to the members – let them share their anecdotes (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). As a leader, one should also ensure that they communicate the vision to students, parents, and community supports (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and that there is a system created for feedback (Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

*Coach and model.* The pursuit of knowledge cannot be taught; it is a way of being that must be modeled (Haberman, 2004). Inspirational leaders themselves work in teams just as they expect their staff to. They use the same iterative process of collaborative brainstorming and problem solving as staff do in their PLC groups to help one another become more effective at the process of inquiry (DuFour, 2009). It is what leaders *do*, not what they say or expect that makes believers out of staff (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Effective leaders will share their own successes and failures, and be comfortable in debate, disagreement and discussion (Lencioni, 2002).

*Monitor.* Monitoring must be *ongoing, job embedded, and results driven* (Schmoker, 2006; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). It requires a *de-privatization of practice* (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and can involve classroom visits by other teachers or by an administrator. These visits can be formal observations or short and informal observations or conversations (SEDL, 1998) and systematically gathered anecdotal evidence (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). No matter the method for monitoring, it should be results-oriented, based on common assessments that become the

basis for further adjustment or improvement. Student achievement should be the main measure of success and efficacy of the instructional program (Levine, 2006). Teachers should be required to justify their assignments and exams to teams and leaders in order to ensure adherence to the vision (Schmoker, 2006) and leaders should intervene when there is an obstacle (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

*Reward, recognize and celebrate.* In order to build momentum, leaders must take time to recognize and celebrate every small win that brings the team closer to achieving its curricular goals (Schmoker, 2006). They should obsessively acknowledge what they want to see more of by celebrating accomplishments. This should happen at every faculty meeting – at least once a week. The recognition can come from leadership or from staff nominations about anything that the community deems to be important. An example of something leaders could celebrate includes the attitudes or dispositions of staff, such as eagerness to work in teams. They can further recognize the development of team norms or protocols, or even one effective team meeting that is focused on instruction or assessments. Since the idea is that staff should be able to enjoy the impact of their efforts on a frequent and ongoing basis, PLC teams should craft goals that foster short-term wins or *quick successes* (Bridges, 2009) and create structures that allow people to see that their hard work is *paying off* (Schmoker, 2006).

*Stay the course with courage.* Taking charge and leading others toward a goal undoubtedly takes courage and persistence (Lencioni, 2002). Initiating and sustaining change requires the courage to take risks, challenge existing systems, to make a case for change, and to stay the course when it gets tough, (Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Because PLCs are continuous and require results-driven practices,

leaders have to have the courage to not only share responsibility with all stakeholders, but must also have the courage to hold individuals and teams accountable, being “...as bottom-up as possible; as top-down as necessary” (Lambert, 1998, p. 245). They must not be afraid to both share responsibility and decision-making as well as hold individuals accountable for agreed-upon processes and products. They cannot be hesitant or afraid to ask teachers for evidence that they are teaching essential standards or for evidence of how many students are mastering those standards (Schmoker, 2006). Therefore, leaders must have the courage to hold teams responsible for providing evidence of formative assessments, grade books, team lesson logs or learning logs, and student work. They must conduct frequent and unannounced visits to classrooms to look for evidence of results-based instruction (Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Schmoker, 2006).

### **Summary**

The literature suggests that PLCs show promise as a vehicle for systematically transforming school sites for the betterment of student learning. Among the research are varying terms and labels but consistent components that have been considered for years prior to the renowned concept of PLCs. From the legislative and political arena, to the classroom and community, researchers, scholars and practitioners are advocating for a systemic change. Current legislation and reforms have a consistent focus on improving instructional practice with the addition of communities of professionals who practice and advocate for the lifelong learning of themselves and all students. While there are accessible reflections on existing PLCs which provide helpful and specific examples of cultural contexts and qualities that are conducive to implementation, there are plenty of

barriers and challenges and few existing empirical studies that reveal the precise methods for leaders to surmount them.

## **Chapter 3: Design and Methodology**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to the implementation and sustainment of PLCs at their sites. The purpose was to investigate the implementation and sustainment of PLCs as related to (a) the significant barriers and challenges faced during implementation, (b) the leadership strategies used to overcome presented challenges and barriers, and (c) the leadership strategies used to sustain the PLC over time.

### **Research Questions**

There were two broad phenomenological research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?
2. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region sustaining PLCs at their sites?

### **Methodology**

This dissertation had a qualitative non-experimental design aimed at exploring the phenomenological experience of six Southern California secondary school leaders in implementing PLCs at their sites. Face to face interviews were used to solicit information about the lived experience of leaders as they implemented and sustain a PLC at their secondary site. Interviews were comprised of five broad open-ended questions followed by several possible probing questions.



**Phenomenological approach.** The fundamental aspect of phenomenology research seeks to understand the essence of an experience. According to Creswell (2007), *phenomenology* describes the meaning of a lived experience or phenomenon for several individuals. Phenomenological research involves collecting individual descriptions from which universal meanings are derived – general meanings or essences of structures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to describe the essence of the lived phenomenon of implementing PLCs at the secondary level. As suggested by Creswell, phenomenological research is best suited when the objective is to, “...understand the common experiences in order to develop practices or policies or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of phenomenon” (p. 60). As Marshall and Rossman (1999) articulate, phenomenological research seeks to uncover the evidence of and meanings underlying the culture of an organization. This requires interpretive work that is based on the lived experiences of people.

The intent of this study was to add to the existing body of knowledge about PLC implementation in order to assist other site leaders in working through the barriers and challenges that thwart implementation or hinder sustainability. Although there were several resources about the theory of PLCs and several articles that support their effectiveness, there was little literature about the underlying obstacles that sites face as they work to transform into PLCs. This deeper understanding was only possible through studies such as this that observe real-world examples of the experience and seek to uncover the common themes among them.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher begins with the gathering of data about the individuals who experienced the phenomenon. Phenomenological research

seeks to determine the "...underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This study was designed to further be transcendental. According to Moustakas, Transcendental Phenomenology "... is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49). In transcendental phenomenological research, the researcher must attempt to transcend their understanding and personal experiences in order to view the phenomenon from an unbiased perspective. After the collection of data, the researcher then analyzes it for significant statements, themes, and descriptions that capture the fundamental nature of the experience. As Creswell (2007) describes, the researcher used the textural and structural descriptions to write a composite description that presents the *essence of the phenomenon*. In this study, the lived experiences of the participants were derived from semi-structured interviews and were then coded thematically for the composition of that description.

### **Rationale for Study Method**

The researcher selected a qualitative research method for this study for two primary reasons: (a) little research exists that examines specifically the PLC implementation process at the secondary level; and (b) qualitative interviewing allows for subjective depictions of the experience rather than measurement, hypothesis testing, or evaluation (Seidman, 1991). As Moustakas (1994) states, "It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurement ratings or scores" (p. 105). This study sought to understand the lived experience as it pertains to the participants. Although there were existing studies

such as Shell (2011) that draw from survey data which reveal the need for strong leaders, most did not reveal the details about implementation or the nuances of the leadership role. This can only be done in a qualitative study. The researcher aimed to generalize the findings, therefore, the researcher looked at more than one school in this study.

### **Positionality**

Considering Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007), a researcher must remain objective which requires the need to be candid regarding past personal experiences. The qualitative researcher is forthright in acknowledging their connection to the topic of study, exposing readers to potential biases, values and interests. In phenomenological research, the researcher must attempt to transcend their understanding and personal experiences in order to view the phenomenon from an unbiased perspective.

*Transcendental* means that everything about the experience is *perceived freshly*, as if for the first time (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). One method of transparency is being up front about personal experience with the phenomenon. In this manner, researchers, describe their own experience with the phenomenon and articulate their views before proceeding with the experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher intended to present, with honesty, personal experience prior to discussing the experiences of the participants, including positionality.

### **Époche**

The *époche* process involves setting aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This means that as the researcher, "...no position is taken whatsoever; every quality has equal value" (p. 87). The researcher did this by adding to the personal observations and judgments that were started in the

transcription process. Within each transcribed interview are *époche* units that contain an aside of personal experiences. In doing this, the researcher engaged in a *reflective meditation* where the prejudgments were labeled and written out (p. 89) in an attempt to be transparent about preconceptions and biases.

The researcher of this study was a secondary level administrator interested in PLCs to improve student learning at her own site. Previously, she participated in the implementation of PLCs at a secondary school where she served as the PLC lead for the tenth-grade English Language Arts Department. Over a two-year period, as a fellow teacher, the researcher experienced the challenge of training a group of educators in creating group norms, establishing essential learnings, creating common formative and summative assessments, and analyzing student assessment data. It was a challenge in that not all members of the group were open to the concept of collaborating around student achievement data. There was resistance and the common complaint was that it was too much work to complete for something that was not going to last. This particular group of teachers had seen a large turnover in staff and administration and with the most recent new principal, the work they had previously done with Smaller Learning Communities was stopped.

The first year of PLC work was spent establishing norms and essential learnings. During the second year, the group built momentum and began to explore common assessments. It was at the end of that year that the researcher left the school and district to pursue an administrative position in another city. The work that had been done stopped when the researcher left.

As a new administrator, the researcher sought to identify the best practices for creating a culture conducive to PLC implementation – the processes, strategies and tools that other sites found helpful in implementing their own. The researcher understood that personal perceptions about the participants were affected by the perceived character traits and the interview experience, therefore, the researcher sought to be up front about any preconceptions about the participants as explained in each *époche* unit below.

### **Subjects and Setting**

The researcher used criterion sampling which focused on individuals who met specific criterion (Creswell, 2007). Patten (2010) asserts that participants should be carefully chosen in phenomenological research. Patten states, “The use of purposely selected participants requires the researcher to have access to particular types of participants who are likely to aid in the understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 29). This chapter discusses the selection of participants and the specific criterion in detail.

**Human subjects consideration.** Prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained permission from the Pepperdine University Institutional Review Board to protect the rights of human participants. This research study was conducted in accordance with the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, DHHS (CFR), Title 45 Part 46 (45 CFR 46). The researcher applied to the IRB for an exempt review process based on criteria set forth in 45 CFR and 46.101 (b)(2). The researcher submitted an application to the Pepperdine IRB for approval and passed without modifications needed.

This study presented minimal risk to the participants. According to Moustakas (1994), “The interviewer is responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively” (p.

114). The researcher made every effort to make the participants comfortable. The researcher reminded participants that they could end the interview at any time. As part of the IRB process, the researcher asked the district superintendent or designee for permission to recruit participants (Appendix C). The researcher used a letter of permission from the superintendent when contacting the sites.

Once district approval was received, the researcher contacted designated principals via email and letter by United States Postal Service to share the purpose of the study and determine their willingness to participate (Appendix D) and Informed Consent Form (Appendix F). The researcher followed with an email to answer any questions (Appendix G) and review informed consent for participation in research activities with the participants. Before any information was obtained, the researcher discussed the consent thoroughly with each participant. In accordance with Pepperdine University requirements, the researcher provided a letter (Appendix D) meeting requirements for the written statement regarding the research. Any potential risk to the participants was minimal and was discussed in the informed consent form.

**Subject size and selection.** According to Seidman (1991), there must be a limit to the number of participants in a study as sampling should maximize information to the point of saturation. The designated number of participants can be as few as one to three subjects. The important point is to choose individuals who represent people who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the participants were selected by purposive criterion sampling. If those selected decline to participate, the researcher moved on to the next identified PLC school. The researcher chose the participants without regard to ethnicity, gender, credentials, employment status, or years

of teaching/administrative experience. If additional participants were required, snowball sampling was used to reach a desirable number of participants. The researcher anticipated that the study would include a sample size of six participants. The five inclusion criterion were as follows:

1. Self-identification as a PLC secondary school.
2. The participant had experienced the phenomenon of leadership participation in the implementation of a school-wide PLC. In other words, the participant was the administrator or leader who was in charge of implementing the PLC at their site.
3. The participant was interested in understanding the nature of the experience. According to Moustakas (1994), an essential criterion is that the participant be, "...intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings" (p. 107).
4. The participant was willing to participate in a lengthy interview (Moustakas, 1994).
5. The participant granted the researcher the right to digitally record and publish the data (Moustakas, 1994).

Criterion sampling was accomplished by visiting PLC websites and searching their databases for counties and districts that were identified as PLC organizations. The researcher then contacted each district superintendent by U.S. mail and requested permission to solicit principals within their district. Approximately 21 districts were invited to participate in the study; eight Superintendents granted the researcher permission to solicit participants within their district. Approximately 20 administrators were contacted for possible participation; six accepted and granted the researcher a one-on-one interview.

Included in the study were two counties within Southern California: Riverside County and Los Angeles County. The study included five districts and six high schools within these two counties. Four schools were within Riverside County (RC#1, RC#2, RC#3, and RC#4), and two were within Los Angeles County (LA#1 and LA#2). All six leaders were high school administrators including five principals and two assistant principals. RC#3 included two participants including a principal (male) and his Assistant Principal (female) so there were six sites and seven participants. Table 1 illustrates the sites and the respective participant pseudonyms assigned by the researcher.

Two of the participants were responsible for initiating and carrying out the implementation of the PLCs at their sites from the beginning. The remaining five participants inherited the implementation from previous principals who left the site. Although they did not initiate the implementation, they were all in the beginning stages of implementation and the participants were responsible for the full implementation once they took over. All six sites had implemented PLCs at least 5 years prior to the beginning of this study.

All participants were teachers prior to obtaining their administrative credentials. All of them had been administrators for a minimum of five years and had earned degrees beyond their undergraduate work. Three of them held Educational Administration Masters in Science degrees, two held an Educational Administration Masters of Arts degree, and two of them had earned an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Administration, and/or Policy. Four of the participants were males; three were females.



Table 1 illustrates the demographics for the six participants in the study. This information was collected using a questionnaire (Appendix A) that is discussed in the data collection section of this chapter.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics and Background Information*

Site	Participant	Title	Education (Highest Level)	Credential	Years at current school site	Years of overall leadership experience
RC#1	Ed	Principal	Ed.D Administration & Educational Leadership	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	24	10
RC#2	Alvin	Principal	MA Educational leadership and Policy Studies	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	5	10
RC#3	Mario	Principal	MS Educational Administration	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	4	5
RC#3	Anna	Assistant Principal	MA Education	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	3	10
RC#4	Christine	Principal	Ed.D Organizational Leadership	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	4	10
LA#1	Bob	Assistant Principal	MS Educational Leadership	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	6	6
LA#2	Alexis	Principal	MS Administration and Educational Leadership	Single Subject Teaching; Administrative Services	12	6

Table 1 breaks down the basic demographic and background information for the six participants.

Table 2

*Site Demographics and Background Information*

Site Pseudonym	Participant Pseudonym	Type of School	Grades	No. of Staff	No. of teachers	Calendar type
<i>RC# 1</i>	Ed	Secondary	9-12	1950	120	Traditional
<i>RC# 2</i>	Alvin	Secondary	9-12	2300	170	Traditional
<i>RC# 3</i>	Mario & Anna	Secondary	9-12	3400	140	Traditional
<i>RC# 4</i>	Christine	Secondary	9-12	2500	195	Traditional
<i>LA# 1</i>	Bob	Secondary	9-12	1700	150	Traditional
<i>LA# 2</i>	Alexis	Secondary	9-12	2250	183	Traditional

Table 2 illustrates the demographic information for each respective site.

**Subject participation.** Each participant engaged in four activities during the study as follows:

1. Completed an online, 10 question biographical/demographic questionnaire, detailing his/her education, experience and basic demographic information about his/her site.
2. Participated in a 5-10 minute phone interview to review the demographic questionnaire, informed consent and study details.
3. Participated in an audio-recorded 60-90 minute one-on-one in-depth interview consisting of five broad open-ended questions and possible probing questions. These interviews were conducted during the months of June through July of 2012.
4. Member check: Once the researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the one-on-one interview, the transcripts were emailed to each participant in PDF format.

Each participant had the opportunity to review and correct the responses before they were published.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrumentation used for this qualitative study was face-to-face semi structured interviews with PLC leaders including administrators, teachers or other instructional leaders who participated in the implementation of the PLC. The interview instrument consisted of five broad and open-ended semi-structured interview questions with several possible probing questions (Appendix B). The interview questions were given to the participants by PDF email attachment one week prior to their scheduled interview in order for them to have time to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful way and to eliminate any nervousness they may have felt going into the interview.

The researcher used current research and characteristics of PLCs in addition to the theoretical framework to develop the interview questions. The researcher used the open-ended questions in Table 3 to gather qualitative data regarding the lived experience of implementing PLCs specifically in regards to the leadership role. The goal was to obtain naïve descriptions through the open-ended questions and dialogue (Giorgi, 1985).

The researcher created the interview questions from a review of literature of factors contributing to school reform efforts, the implementation of PLCs, transformational leadership and existing phenomenological research studies. Factors contributing to reform efforts became the basis for the following themes found in the literature review in Chapter 2. These factors or themes include (a) facing the facts and making the case for PLCs, (b) the processes strategies and tools used to create a culture of collaboration, (c) the significant barriers or challenges a leader faces during

implementation, (d) the effective leadership strategies used to overcome challenges and barriers, and (e) the effective leadership strategies used to sustain the PLC over time.

Table 3 presents the relationship between the research question, interview questions and themes from cited research.

Table 3

*Correlation Between Research Questions, Interview Questions and Themes in the Literature*

Research Question	Interview Question(s)	Theme and Cited Research
1. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?	<p>Main Question: In your own words, please explain your reasons for and rationale behind the implementation of Professional learning communities?</p> <p><u>Possible Probing Questions:</u> Paint a picture for me of your school prior to the implementation of PLCs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What was communication like amongst stakeholders?</li> <li>- How would you describe collaboration between teachers and other support staff?</li> <li>- Describe the models for coaching and monitoring of instructional practices.</li> <li>- Did staff ever celebrate successes or face the "brutal facts" of failures in student achievement?</li> <li>- Who made the decisions in regards to academics and interventions for students?</li> <li>- Who decided to implement PLCs? Why?</li> <li>- What was the intention or goal behind implementing PLCs?</li> <li>- How did you come to know about PLCs?</li> <li>- How did you go about establishing a purpose and direction for staff?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: assessing the current reality and making the case for PLCs</i></p> <p>Adams (2009) Bender (2009) Burnette (2002) Collins (2001) Doerr (2009) DuFour (2008) DuFour et al. (1998) Feger &amp; Arruda (2008) Fullan (1993) Haberman (2004) Hord (1998) Hord &amp; Sommers (2008) King &amp; Newman (2000) Lee, Smith &amp; Croninger (1995) Lencioni (2002) Little (1991) Louis &amp; Kruse (1995) Louis, Kruse &amp; Marks (1998) Many (2009) McLaughlin &amp; Talbert (1993) Marzano (2011) Newman (1996) Schmoker (2006) Shapiro &amp; Gross (2008) Shapiro &amp; Stefkovich (2011) Werner (2011) Wenger &amp; Snyder (2000) Zander &amp; Zander (2000)</p>

(continued)

Research Question	Interview Question(s)	Theme and Cited Research
2. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?	<p>Main Question: Recall the process of implementation. Describe for me the steps taken and the resources used to create PLCs.</p> <p><u>Possible Probing Questions:</u> How was staff educated about PLCs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What literature did you study when you were beginning to form your PLC?</li> <li>- Describe for me how you went about introducing the concept of PLCs to staff.</li> </ul> <p>In your opinion, what were the most integral resources used during implementation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did these resources exist prior to implementation? If not, who provided them?</li> </ul> <p>As a leader, how did you support staff and create a culture of shared leadership?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did you go about creating a shared vision, mission and values?</li> <li>- What were some of the underlying assumptions that were brought to the surface or challenged during this process?</li> <li>- What processes were used to create a sense of collective responsibility and shared leadership with staff?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: processes strategies and tools used to create a culture of collaboration focused on student learning</i></p> <p>Bridges (2009) Burnette (2002) Cochran-Smith &amp; Lytle (1996) Collins (2001) Covey (2004) Darling-Hammond &amp; Sykes (1999) Doerr (2009) DuFour (2008) DuFour et al. (1998) Fullan (2006) Grossman et al. (2001) Haberman (2004) Hord (1998) Hord &amp; Sommers (2008) Intrator &amp; Kunzman (2006) Leithwood, Seashore, -Louis, Anderson &amp; Wahlstrom (2004) King &amp; Newman (2000) Lieberman &amp; Grolnick (1996) Little (1991) Louis &amp; Kruse (1995) Many (2009) McLaughlin &amp; Talbert (2001) Nelson &amp; Hammerman (1996) Schmoker (2006) Stoll, et. al (2006) Wenger &amp; Snyder (2000) Zander &amp; Zander (2000)</p>
3. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?	<p>Main Question: When you think back through the process of moving into a PLC structure, what would you identify as the most significant barriers or challenges faced during implementation?</p> <p><u>Possible Probing Questions:</u> What conflicts arose during the change process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe for me an encounter of resistance from a staff member and how you went about getting them on board.</li> <li>- How did you go about acknowledging staff concerns?</li> </ul> <p>What resources did you find were lacking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When facing inadequate resources, how did you manage to support staff?</li> </ul> <p>What challenges did you face as a leader or a staff that you could not find the answers to in the literature?</p> <p>How did you deal with ambiguity regarding implementation procedures?</p> <p>How did you address professional development?</p>	<p><i>Theme: significant barriers or challenges a leader faces during implementation</i></p> <p>Burnette (2002) Cochran-Smith &amp; Lytle (1996) Collins (2001) Covey (2004) Darling-Hammond &amp; Sykes (1999) Doerr (2009) DuFour (2008) DuFour et al. (1998) Fullan (2006) Furman (1999) Grossman et al. (2001) Haberman (2004) Hord (1998) Hord &amp; Sommers (2008) King &amp; Newman (2000) Lieberman &amp; Grolnick (1996) Little (1991) Louis &amp; Kruse (1995) Many (2009) McLaughlin &amp; Talbert (2001) Nelson &amp; Hammerman (1996) Schein (2004) Schmoker (2006) Wenger &amp; Snyder (2000) Westheimer (1998) Zander &amp; Zander (2000)</p>

(continued)

Research Question	Interview Question(s)	Theme and Cited Research
4. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?	<p>Main Question: As a leader, what did you do specifically, to help yourself or staff to overcome presented challenges and barriers during the implementation process?</p> <p><u>Possible Probing Questions:</u> How would you say your leadership style affected the implementation of the PLC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How would you describe your leadership style?</li> <li>- What would be a specific example of how your leadership style affected the implementation process?</li> <li>- What exactly did you do as a leader that made implementation possible?</li> </ul> <p>As a leader, how did you lead with questions instead of answers?</p> <p>Did courage play a role in your leadership throughout this process?</p>	<p><i>Theme: effective leadership strategies used to overcome presented challenges and barriers</i></p> <p>Bender (2009) Bennis (1989) Bridges (2009) Burnette (2002) Collins (2001) Covey (2004) Doerr (2009) DuFour (2008) DuFour et al. (1998) Elmore (2000) Fullan (2006) Grossman et. al. (2001) Haberman (2004) Hart (1994) Hord (1998) Hord &amp; Sommers (2008) Katzenmeyer &amp; Moller (2001) King &amp; Newman (2000) Louis &amp; Kruse (1995) Neufeld &amp; Roper (2002) Newman (1996) Poglinco et. al. (2003) Reischstetter (2006) Schein (2004) SEDL (1998) Schmoker (2006) Spillane (2006) Spillane, Halversob &amp; Diamond (2008) Wells &amp; Feun (2007) Zander &amp; Zander (2000)</p>
5. What are the lived experiences of six secondary school leaders in the Southern California region sustaining PLCs at their sites?	<p>Take a moment to reflect on your current leadership practices. Now that your site functions as PLCs, what strategies or resources do you use to help sustain the formation and work of the PLCs?</p> <p><u>Possible Probing Questions:</u> How would you say that your leadership style continues to affect the sustainment of the PLC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What would be a specific example?</li> <li>- How would you characterize your current relationships with staff?</li> </ul> <p>Describe the differences you see in your school now that PLCs have been implemented.</p> <p>What do you feel are the most integral resources in making the PLCs sustainable?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What physical and structural supports do you tend to in order to make the PLCs possible?</li> <li>- What relational factors/human capacities do you continue to nourish?</li> </ul> <p>How do you collaborate with your staff?</p>	<p><i>Theme: effective leadership strategies used to sustain the PLC over time</i></p> <p>Bender (2009) Bennis (1989) Bridges (2009) Boyd (1992) Burnette (2002) Collins (2001) Covey (2004) Doerr (2009) DuFour (2008) DuFour et al. (1998) Elmore (2000) Fullan (2006) Grossman et. al. (2001) Haberman (2004) Hart (1994) Hord (1998) Hord &amp; Sommers (2008) Katzenmeyer &amp; Moller (2001) King &amp; Newman (2000) Lambert (1998) Louis &amp; Kruse (1995) McLaughlin &amp; Talbert (2010) Neufeld &amp; Roper (2002) Newman (1996) Poglinco et. al. (2003) Reischstetter (2006)</p>

(continued)

Research Question	Interview Question(s)	Theme and Cited Research
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you communicate the struggles and successes to staff?</li> <li>- How do you celebrate successes? How often?</li> </ul>	Schein (2004) SEDL (1998) Schmoker (2006) Spillane (2006) Spillane, Halversob & Diamond (2008)
	How do you coach and model the characteristics of a PLC member to staff?	Tichy (1997) Wells & Feun (2007) Zander & Zander (2000)
	How do you ensure that staff continues to collaborate around common goals focused on student learning? How do you measure participation?	

Table 3 specifies the research questions, the five main questions, and their correlation with the possible probing questions that were used to probe for specificity.

### Interview Questions

There were five broad interview questions and several possible probing questions. The researcher asked the following four interview questions to gather data for exploration of the first research question:

1. In your own words, please explain your reasons for and rationale behind the implementation of Professional Learning Communities.
2. Recall the process of implementation. Describe for me the steps taken and the resources used to create PLCs.
3. When you think back through the process of moving into a PLC structure, what would you identify as the most significant barriers or challenges faced during implementation?
4. As a leader, what did you do specifically, to help yourself or staff to overcome presented challenges and barriers during the implementation process?

The researcher asked one interview question to gather data for exploration of the second research question:

1. Take a moment to reflect on your current leadership practices. Now that your site functions as PLCs, what strategies or resources do you use to help sustain the formation and work of the PLCs?

### **Credibility of the Instrument**

The researcher developed the open-ended interview questions from the review of related literature and piloted them with the administrator at a high school with a comparable student and teacher demographic as the intended participants. The researcher conducted a mock interview with the PLC leader at this site and feedback was collected in regards to the effectiveness of the interview questions. The PLC leader was a secondary school principal who had implemented PLCs at his site over a 3-year period. He had attended several PLC trainings through Solution Tree and was successful in implementing PLCs school-wide. After a 5-year period, the site had seen considerable gains in their API score and were continuing each year to collaborate around students learning and instruction as evidenced by their continual gains.

The pilot test sought to determine if the intended interview questions were worded in an understandable way and if they lead the interviewee to expound upon the phenomenological experience. The interview questions were edited with few minor grammatical changes after the feedback was received. The pilot interviewee otherwise believed that the questions were easy to understand and allowed for him to expound on the important aspects of his experience, leading to the conclusion that the instrument contained credibility.



## **Data Collection**

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with six participants between June and July, 2012. Letters of request for participation were sent to potential participants by email and United States postal service in May of 2012 (Appendix D). Prior to the formal interview, the researcher conducted a 5-10 minute initial screening interview by telephone and the participants completed an online questionnaire containing 10 questions regarding basic demographic information including (a) title, (b) number of students at the site, (c) number of staff members at the site, (d) types of degrees earned, (e) credential specifics, (f) number of years employed at the site, (g) number of years employed with the district, (h) years of leadership experience, and (i) years of overall experience in education (Appendix A). As Patten (2010) explains, “Demographic information will help to give (the) readers a picture of the participants” (p. 83). These questions were open-ended so each participant was able to describe himself/herself without pre-scripted labels. During this informal conversation, the researcher described to the potential participants how they were identified, briefly described the purpose of the research and the details of the study including the topic, the interview process and how the collected data was to be used. The researcher obtained informed consent from the participants at this time.

The in-depth formal one-on-one interviews were scheduled to last between 60-90 minutes and took place at a mutually convenient place and time (not during contractual duty hours). Each interview was in-person, tape-recorded with a digital tape recorder, and transcribed into a Microsoft Word document verbatim along with researcher notes (Appendix H). The notes include bracketed researcher observations of non-verbal

communication on the part of the interviewee, reactions and comments on the part of the researcher, and a description of any problems experienced during the interview.

The interviews began by reviewing the purpose of the research, informed consent and human subject protections. Prior to conducting the interviews, each participant completed an online survey that included an electronic signature on the Participant Consent Form. The researcher restated that the interview would be recorded, transcribed verbatim, and that all responses would remain confidential by the use of a pseudonym. The researcher explained the outline of the interview, including the goal to have the participant relay their story with as little probing questions as possible. The researcher then engaged in an informal conversation with the participant. As Moustakas (1994) explains, the interview often begins with, "...a social conversation...aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere" (p. 114). The idea is to relax the participant and prepare to engage them in reflective discussion. After the informal conversation, the researcher then prompted the participant to share their experience of implementing a PLC at their site. Moustakas suggests that this brief opening be followed by a meditative activity, where the participant takes, "...a few moments to focus on the experience, moments of particular awareness and impact, and then describe the experience fully" (p. 114). As the participant relayed their story, the researcher, referred back to the five overarching interview questions and probing questions as needed for clarification.

As suggested by Creswell (2007), there were five broad questions asked during the interview. Moustakas (1994) articulates that although the researcher may develop questions in advance aimed at "...evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the

(participant) shares the full story of his/her experience” (p. 114). If the full story was told without the need for further probing, only the five open-ended questions were used.

1. In your own words, please explain your reasons for and rationale behind the implementation of Professional Learning Communities?
2. Recall the process of implementation. Describe for me the steps taken and the resources used to create PLCs.
3. When you think back through the process of transitioning into a PLC structure, what would you identify as the most significant barriers or challenges faced during implementation? What would you identify as the successes?
4. As a leader, what did you do specifically to help yourself or staff to overcome presented challenges or barriers during the implementation process?
5. Take a moment to reflect on your current leadership practices. Now that your site functions as a PLCs, what strategies or resources do you use to help sustain the formation and work of the PLCs?

In addition to these broad questions, the researcher probed for specificity as necessary for clarification and elaboration based upon the flow of each conversation. According to Leedy and Omrod (2005), semi-structured interviews feel less formal and friendlier than strictly structured interviews. They indicate, “In semi-structured interviews, the researcher may follow the standard questions with one more individually tailored questions to get clarification” (p. 185). Participants were informed that the interview data was confidential and secured to ensure confidentiality, that they could

refuse to answer any question at any time, and that their identity would be protected through the use of a pseudonym.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The researcher intended to use a multiple step analysis process as described by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994). The process involved, "...organizing and analyzing data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). This process will entailed preparing the data and conducting different levels of analyses in order to delve deeper into understanding it (Creswell, 2007). Using a six-step process, the researcher: (a) managed the data, (b) conducted a read and memo, (c) described, (d) classified, (e) interpreted, and (f) represented and visualized the data.

Interviews from each participant were analyzed and coded for determined units of meaning, known as *horizontalization* (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The meaning units were analyzed and coded into similar themes. Themes that were present in all six participant interviews, were connected texturally (what) and structurally (how), describing their experiences implementing PLCs.

**Step 1 - Manage the data.** Immediately after each interview, the researcher began the process of managing the data. The first step in the data analysis process involved creating and organizing files for data (Creswell, 2007). To do this, the researcher:

1. transcribed the one-on-one interviews verbatim into a Microsoft Word document including:
  - (a) an abstract summarizing the location, time, and place,

- (b) numbered lines of verbatim transcription with researcher observations separated from actual spoken text, and
  - (c) a summary including researcher interjections and synthesis of information (Appendix H), and
2. transcribed the audio-recorded interviews into a Microsoft Word document in preparation for further analysis.

**Step 2 - Read and memo.** The second step required the researcher to begin to sort through the data. Creswell (2007) explains that the researcher must, "...read through the text, make margin notes, (and) form initial codes" (p. 156). This was done in order to get a sense of the data and to contemplate the general meaning. Giorgi (1979) specifies two steps in the reading and memoing process. In the first step, the researcher reads through the entire text to get a sense of the whole, and then more slowly reads the text again, delineating each line where there is a perceived transition in meaning with the intent to discover the meaning. To do this, the researcher:

1. read each participant's basic demographic data straight through to get a general sense of the data,
2. read each participant's basic demographic data again, and typed notes in the margins in order to organize the data and begin to make connections,
3. read each participant's interview transcript straight through in order to get a general sense of the experience, and
4. read each participant's interview transcript again, and wrote notes in the margins in order to organize the data and begin to make connections to the literature.

**Step 3 - Describe.** The third step involved describing the collected personal experiences through *époche*, in order to take an unmarked perspective toward the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas explains that whatever appears in our consciousness is approached with an openness. “The challenge of *époche* is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness, to disclose itself” (pp. 85-86). The researcher did this by adding to the personal observations and judgments that were started in the transcription process. During the transcription of each interview were *époche* units that contain an aside of personal experiences. This process involves setting aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This means that as the researcher, “...no position is taken whatsoever; every quality has equal value” (p.87). In doing this, the researcher engaged in a *reflective meditation* where the prejudgments were labeled and written out (p. 89) in an attempt to be transparent about preconceptions and biases.

**Step 4 – Classify.** Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) describe the fourth step as classifying the data by developing significant statements and grouping statements into *meaning units*. This process is also referred to as *transcendental phenomenological reduction* and involves a pre-reflective description of things just as they appear (Moustakas, 1994). One way to approach this is to first create a list of *significant statements* from the interviews (horizontalization of the data), treating each statement as having *equal worth* (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Moustakas (1994) describes this as a “...listing and preliminary grouping – listing every expression relevant to the experience” (p. 120). It further involves *detailed analysis* with *coding* (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). Booth (2008) describes the concept as *writing to understand* in the research process. He states,

“When you arrange and rearrange the results of your research in new ways, you discover new implications, connections and complications” (p. 12). Therefore, the researcher classified participant responses into emerging themes and *clusters* (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) in order to understand common experiences. To do this, the researcher engaged in a process of reduction and elimination in order to determine the *invariant constituents*. In order to be an *invariant constituent*, there are two required qualities: (a) it contains a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding the phenomenon, and (b) it is possible to abstract and label it (Moustakas, 1994). In order to do this, the researcher:

1. combined same statements,
2. combined similar statements in order to avoid repetition, and
3. created a coding process to label the significant like statements and the emerging core themes (Moustakas, 1994).

The qualitative responses gathered during the interviews were read several times and then coded to identify emerging themes of the phenomenon. Subsequent refinement of coding occurred as the data was read, reorganized, and read again. The researcher created analyses tables which included (a) the emerging themes, (b) the numbered lines in which they appear in the transcripts, and (c) key words or phrases that constitute the invariant constituents.

**Step 5 – Interpret.** The fifth step required the researcher to develop a *textural description* - what the participants experienced as narrated by the participant (Moustakas, 1994, p. 133), and a *structural description* - how the phenomenon was experienced. Moustakas describes the process of developing the *structural description* as *imaginative*

*variation*. According to Moustakas, the structural description, "...provides a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience, the themes and qualities that account for 'how' feelings and thoughts are aroused and what conditions evoke those feelings and thoughts" (p. 135).

The final step is to then develop the *essence* (Creswell, 2007, p. 157) or synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). To do this, the researcher combined the experiences, including quotations from the transcribed interviews and combined them into generalized experiences, recording a description of *what* and *how* each participant experienced the phenomenon. As suggested by Moustakas, the researcher did this in four steps:

1. *Époche*: This process involves setting aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas (p. 85). This included researcher asides of personal experiences and perceptions.
2. *Phenomenological Reduction*: Also called, *transcendental phenomenological reduction*, this process involved a pre-reflective description of things just as they appear, Moustakas (1994) explains this as "...describing in textural language just what one sees...look and describe" (p. 90). It was followed by a reduction to what is. "horizontal and thematic" (p. 91). This process produced the textural description.
3. *Imaginative variation*: Moustakas describes this task as seeking possible meanings through, "...imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions" (pp. 97-98). This allowed the researcher to



develop structural themes from the textural descriptions, which produces the *structural description*.

4. Synthesis: This process produces the *essence* (composite) of the combined experiences.

**Step 6 – Represent and visualize.** The sixth and final step was to present a narration of the *essence* of the experience in tables, figures, and discussion (Creswell, 2007, p. 156) or a *themes narrative* (Creswell, 2009, p. 189). To do this, the researcher used a combination of narrative writing and tables for synthesis and illustration of the combined experiences of the participants.

### **Validity**

To ensure validity, the researcher will strive to achieve *credibility* and *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2007) considers validation to be, “...an attempt to address the *accuracy*: of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (p. 206). The researcher will follow procedures followed in data collection including the same methods used in each interview and post-interview member checks. Validity will be attained through the following validation strategies: (a) clarification of researcher bias, (b) member checks, and (c) peer review.

**Clarification of researcher bias.** Creswell (2007) asserts, “In this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (p. 208). To do this, the researcher stated her positionality in regards to past knowledge and experience with PLC implementation.

**Member checks.** The researcher conducted member checks with participants regarding the accuracy of interview transcriptions. Creswell (2007) states, “In member checking, the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 208). To do this the researcher shared the transcribed interview notes including the synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions of their experiences, and requested each participant to carefully review the combined description in order to make any necessary additions or corrections. The researcher then revised the synthesis statement as needed. This was completed with each participant so that that they could judge the accuracy and credibility of the findings.

### **Threats to Internal Validity**

Due to the fact that this study was based upon the self-reported phenomenological experience of the participants, there were natural threats to internal validity including: (a) natural participant bias or emotional responses in talking about their positive or negative experiences, (b) the possibility of the participant downplaying or embellishing their role in the process due to threats to ego, and (c) incomplete or rushed answers to interview questions due to participant fatigue during the interview process. Through the use of probing questions, the researcher attempted to limit these threats during data collection.

### **Trustworthiness**

Maxwell (1995) warns that a researcher must establish trustworthiness, ensuring that the collection of information was done so without researcher bias and influence. For the purpose of establishing trustworthiness, the researcher used *member checks* (p. 89). The researcher transcribed participant interviews word-for-word and bracketed out any preconceptions (Appendix H). The researcher asked participants to verify the accuracy of

the transcriptions and asked whether they agreed with the identified themes as well as the articulation of their experiences.

**Confidentiality.** In a professional setting such as a school, individuals may hold back true opinions and perspectives if they feel that articulating their beliefs may threaten their standing with their supervisors or colleagues. Creswell (2007) articulates this issue and indicates that a researcher should plan to protect the privacy of the participants. The researcher offered confidentiality to the participants. The researcher collected the questionnaires and kept them locked in a secure location until the researcher could record the responses. Once this was completed, the researcher deleted the participant's name from the documents and returned the data to the secure location. Participant privacy was protected by the use of pseudonyms for school sites and names.

Individual responses elicited during the interviews were tape recorded with the participant's permission by using an audio recorder and were later transcribed into a typed document. The document was only be available to the researcher. The researcher met with participants face-to-face. For the purpose of transcribing the interviews, the same procedure was used. The researcher created pseudonyms, with an index available only to the researcher, to ensure that the data could not be connected to specific individuals. All data was kept confidential and secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office and on a personal laptop computer in a password-protected digital file. Physical data will be destroyed by a paper shredder after three years.

### **Data Findings**

The information gathered in this study is presented in Chapter 4 to describe the common themes and textural-structural description and essence, including direct quotations to support the analysis. Chapter 4 discusses the interview findings including: (a) *époche*, (b) composite themes,

(c) a composite textural description, (d) a composite structural description, and (e) a composite essence of the six participants categorized by the identified themes.

## Chapter 4: Results of the Study

### Overview

This chapter discusses the interview findings including (a) an *époque*, (b) the composite themes, (c) composite textural descriptions, (d) composite structural descriptions, and (e) composite essences of the six participants categorized by the emerging themes.

### Époque

As a new administrator, the researcher sought to identify the best practices for creating a culture conducive to PLC implementation – the processes, strategies and tools that other sites found helpful in implementing their own. The researcher understood that personal perceptions about the participants were affected by the perceived character traits and the interview experience, therefore, the researcher sought to be up front about any preconceptions about the participants as explained in each participant *époque* unit below.

**RC#1 Époque.** Ed came across as a very kind person as he was very welcoming to the researcher and accommodated the interview during the summer break. He personally came out of his office to greet the researcher and walk her into his office. It appeared that he was very passionate about student achievement and keeping his staff content. He spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on the positive gains in student achievement and his desire to keep his staff happy. The researcher perceived that the participant avoided conflict because he made several comments about accommodating requests and appeasing his staff during time of conflict instead of mandating certain aspects of PLCs, especially in regard to common assessments. Due to this, the researcher questioned the fidelity with which PLCs had been implemented as not

all of the PLCs had common assessments and not all PLCs that had common assessments actually used the data from them to drive instruction. The participant referenced early on, with what appeared to be frustration, that PLCs had “atrophied” at the site. Due to the manner in which the participant spoke about PLCs, to the researcher, reflected a site that was “doing” some PLC activities without truly becoming a PLC school. It appeared to the researcher that while teams were asked to produce items such as common assessments, there was no accountability or follow-up for the finished product.

During the member check of the transcript, Ed corrected a researcher observation. When the participant was talking about test scores being a measure of teacher effectiveness, he stated that test scores of “bad” teachers are the same as the “good” teachers. The researcher sensed sarcasm, but the participant stated that he did not intend on being sarcastic. This observation was corrected in the transcript.

**RC#2 Époche.** The researcher was immediately impressed by Alvin and his extensive leadership knowledge. He appeared to have knowledge about effective leadership strategies, had excellent communication skills, and an assertive demeanor. During the course of the interview, Alvin alluded to the common components of PLCs that were implemented at RC#2. He referenced DuFour literature in regards to PLC structures, and mentioned several other researchers and authors from whom he derived his staff trainings. The researcher believed that this site had become a successful PLC when he mentioned that the staff continued with the structure even after he left the principalship. During the member check, he responded that the he was *happy* with the transcripts and no changes were needed.

**RC#3 Époche.** The researcher was surprised when she arrived at the site for the interview. The originally intended participant was the principal, Mario. However, upon arriving, the principal informed the researcher that the assistant principal, Anna, who aided in the implementation would also be part of the interview. The two administrators appeared to be in accord with each other – what one started to explain, the other would expound on. Mario and Anna showed, during the course of the interview that they understood what a PLC is by alluding to the common PLC components and providing evidence of implementation. They both appeared very passionate about PLCs and shared artifacts with the researcher to illustrate their claims. Anna even walked the researcher to a separate building in 100-degree weather to show her some of those artifacts which had been posted onto a wall for permanent display. During the member check, they both responded that they approved the transcript and no changes were needed.

**RC#4 Époche.** Christine had taken time from a family gathering to meet with the researcher during the summer break, which showed the researcher that she valued the study. Her passion for student achievement, knowledge about leadership practices and her assertive demeanor was apparent to the researcher through her monologue about student achievement and staff expectations. She was very succinct in her answers. Therefore, at times, it appeared to the researcher that she was in a hurry to leave (This was the shortest interview at 31:52 minutes). However, when the researcher probed further, she stated that she did not have any more to share. During the member check, she did not provide the researcher with any necessary changes.

**LA#1 Époche.** Bob was not the originally intended participant. The original participant was the principal of the site but she referred the researcher to Bob as she had

accepted a new position away from the site. While the other sites had been selected through identification as PLC schools through the AllThingsPLC.com website, this school has been identified through their own website, which boasted PLC work. As Bob began to describe the implementation process and the PLC components present at the site, it became apparent to the researcher that he was well-versed in the components of a PLC and the researcher believed they had been implemented with fidelity. His experience was especially rich as he had experienced the implementation of PLCs at the middle school level and then at the secondary level. Due to this – the opportunity to reflect on the process before attempting it again , it seemed to the researcher that he was very knowledgeable about the components of a PLC and the effective strategies for implementing and sustaining it. During the member check, he did not provide the researcher with any necessary changes.

**LA#2 Époche.** The researcher felt it was important to clarify that she personally knew Alexis. The school was not identified as a PLC school on any websites or publication. However, from personal experience with the staff at LA#2, it was apparent to the researcher that they were living a PLC culture based upon the PLC components outlined in the literature. Because of this, the researcher requested the participation of this leader to investigate how she had implemented and sustained that culture. Alexis readily agreed and made time for the researcher from her new district office position to conduct the interview. She was very open with the researcher about the process of implementing PLCs at her site. During the member check, she did not provide the researcher with any necessary changes.



## Interview Findings

This section includes the analysis results, including direct quotations from the participants. The use of quotes throughout the findings is designed to create a richer understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Sandelowski, 1994).

Richardson (1990) explains,

Through the skillful use of quotes, writers can add to both the documentary and aesthetic value of the research report and, thereby, draw more attention to the voices of people who might otherwise have remained unheard. Quotes privilege individuality and model diversity...within generality. (p. 40)

Through analysis of the six interviews, nine themes pervaded: (a) PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores, (b) lack of communication and collaboration prior to PLC implementation, (c) using resources of time and money, (d) overcoming staff resistance, (e) the importance of a Leadership Team, (f) building relationships, (g) facilitating ongoing communication and celebration, (h) using professional development to promote PLC work, and (i) using common practices for PLCs. Table 4 categorizes each theme by Research Question.

Table 4

### *Themes*

Research Question	Themes
#1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs steps were implemented to address low API scores</li> <li>• Lack of communication and collaboration prior to PLC implementation</li> <li>• Using resources of time and money</li> <li>• Overcoming staff resistance</li> <li>• The importance of a Leadership Team</li> <li>• Building Relationships</li> </ul>
#2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating Ongoing Communication and Celebration</li> <li>• Using professional development to promote PLC work</li> <li>• Using common practices for PLCs</li> </ul>

The following section presents each of the nine themes from Table 4 with (a) a composite textural description, (b) a composite structural description, and (c) an essence. Each theme contains a table presenting the emerging core themes and associated invariant constituents.

**Research Question # 1: What are the Lived Experiences of Six Secondary Site Leaders in the Southern California Region Implementing PLCs at Their Sites?**

**Theme 1: PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores.** The six study participants expressed that they, as leaders, believed in the power of PLCs – but more so, the power of professional collaboration around student data as a catalyst for achieving their varied goals. All six participants saw a need at their sites for the implementation. Table 5 illustrates the textural and structural invariant constituents present in each interview related to Theme 1.

Table 5

*PLC Steps Were Implemented to Address Low API Scores*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	15, 21, 22, 54, 58, 86, 213, 469, 714, 722	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was county-driven training</li> <li>• There county invested in PLCs by providing mentors</li> <li>• The API was in the low 600's</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs can move a school forward</li> <li>• PLCs are a “common sense” approach</li> <li>• PLCs will improve the success rate for ALL students</li> </ul>
RC#2	18, 38, 122, 99, 129, 140-145, 194, 317	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff revisited their mission/vision and aligned them with programs/changes</li> <li>• Western Association of Schools and Colleges Process (WASC)</li> <li>• International Baccalaureate (IB)</li> <li>• Common vision -global goals</li> <li>• Low API</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs are a “common sense” approach</li> <li>• PLCs make it better for kids</li> <li>• PLCs will improve instruction</li> <li>• The mission/vision were aligned with programs/changes</li> </ul>

(continued)

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#3	21, 93, 113	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was district support</li> <li>• There was a data system</li> <li>• There was money for compensation (leaders)</li> <li>• The site had a consistently low API</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs were a way to get out of “Program Improvement”</li> <li>• They were becoming a new school</li> </ul>
RC#4	66, 277	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The district provided data</li> <li>• The district provided academic coaches</li> <li>• The district provided leadership with PLC trainings</li> <li>• Low API</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs will improve student achievement through collaboration of data and instructional practices</li> </ul>
LA#1	14, 290, 659	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration was written into the site’s ESLRs</li> <li>• Low API</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs will improve student achievement</li> </ul>
LA#2	14, 22, 372, 380-383,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical friends groups were being implemented</li> <li>• API was in the 500’s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believed that PLCs would build professionalism of staff</li> <li>• Believed that practitioners need to be involved in making change</li> <li>• Believed in teachers as leaders facilitators and coaches</li> </ul>

***Theme 1: PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores - composite***

***textural description.*** For each participant, there was an obvious and immediate need to improve the school’s student achievement as measured by their API scores, which propelled the change. Table 6 illustrates the API scores for each school prior to implementation.

Table 6

***API Scores Prior to Implementation of PLCs***

Site	Year Prior to Implementation	Base API Score
RC# 1	2004	619
RC# 2	2007	673
RC# 3	2005	653
RC# 4	2007	624

(continued)

Site	Year Prior to Implementation	Base API Score
LA# 1	2005	711
LA# 2	2006	504

For all six participants, an existing program or structure lent itself as a resource for implementation. For all four Riverside County Schools, there was county support for PLC implementation. For LA#1, the school was in the process of revisiting the school's mission and vision through their Expected School-wide Learning Results (ESLRs). For LA#2, there was existing professional development associated with the Schlechty Center and *Working on the Work*.

Three of the six schools did not assume the title *PLC*. One site referred to their teams as *PLTs* for *Professional Learning Teams*. The other two did not have a name for it at all, but stated that they "just did it".

***Theme 1: PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores composite - structural description.*** While the needs themselves varied from site to site, the pervasive theme was that each site had an immediate need for change and believed that PLCs were the best way to move the school forward and improve student achievement as measured by API scores. In order to implement PLCs, each leader had to make a case for change.

Four of the six schools stated that improving student achievement was the intention behind implementing PLCs at their site. One stated that the intent was to improve instruction. One stated that it was the only way to build professionalism of staff and engage them in making the needed changes at their site.

Mario expressed how PLCs got their start at RC#3. He stated:

It was kind of a rogue movement that happened because there was a need, and because the teachers really got on board with it when it was brought to us. Because, at that point it was, you are on your own, what can you guys do? And they gave us that freedom to be able to do that and one of the biggest things that came out of all of the conversations was the need to talk - the need to collaborate. The need to see where students are and so that really just became a catalyst that now is our district model.

Three participants referred to PLCs as being a *common sense* approach to school reform. Ed explained his belief in PLCs and described the moment that he realized PLCs were the only way to improve student achievement at RC#1. He stated:

I honestly believe that the whole model of PLCs or the whole idea behind it is a great way to move a school forward. In fact, it's the best way and I really do believe that. If you get to see the DuFours... I mean they just make the whole thing make sense and you sit there goin', "Duh – why doesn't everyone do this?"

Alvin explained the moment where he realized that PLCs would be the only way to move RC#2 forward. He stated, "...PLCs just became the math. I called it talking to Dr. Obvious – like let's work together – Ohhhhh- what a concept. I never talked about it in the educational sense – we just did it." Alexis expressed the concept of being PLCs rather than doing them as well. When she discussed why her site did not refer to themselves as a PLC school, she stated:

I think when you start labeling things, they become things. They become programs that are going to go away...any time you label something, you risk having it be this thing that people can take or leave or think it's going to go away

until the next thing comes. So I think really, if you are developing a culture, then develop that culture. That is what we were doing. I wasn't developing PLC's, I was developing a culture.

***Theme 1: PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores - essence.***

All of the participants believed in PLCs as a way to move their school's forward while improving academic instruction and achievement. It was referred to as "common sense" – an "obvious" strategy to have teachers collaborating with one another about what happens in the classroom. These leaders believed that their teachers were professionals and had the tools to be successful. Each leader saw an immediate need for change in their schools and felt that PLCs were the answer to empower their staff to make change.

**Theme 2: Lack of communication and collaboration.** A common theme in all six interviews was the lack of communication and collaboration prior to the implementation of PLCs. Table 7 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of Lack of Communication and Collaboration.

Table 7

*Lack of Communication and Collaboration*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	102-103	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was not any prior communication</li> <li>• There was not any prior collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers did not understand what was expected of them</li> </ul>
RC#2	52, 64-65	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was not any staff collaboration</li> <li>• Prior collaboration was not about instruction</li> <li>• The teachers and administrators did not talk about instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was poor communication</li> <li>• Staff meetings were forums for complaints/negative</li> <li>• It was "us against them" (administration versus staff)</li> </ul>

(continued)

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#3	693, 709	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The focus was on teaching (not on learning)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was not any collaboration or accountability of instruction</li> </ul>
RC#4	25-26, 27-28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication was about department needs and complaints about administration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaboration was about what was wrong with students and education</li> </ul>
LA #1	43-44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was not any organized collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There were only informal gatherings</li> </ul>
LA#2	40, 410- 411	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was not any collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was a lack of relationships and communication</li> <li>There was a chasm between admin and staff</li> </ul>

***Theme 2: Lack of communication and collaboration – composite textural***

***description.*** All six participants experienced the challenge of transforming their secondary sites from cultures of isolation and separation into collaborative PLCs. They all expressed the lack of existing communication and collaboration at their sites as a challenge when they began the implementation process. Five out of the six participants stated that there was no *communication* about student achievement and instruction, and all six participants stated that there was little or no *collaboration*, especially around instruction.

Ed stated that prior to PLC implementation, staff communication and collaboration was “almost non-existent”. The staff did not understand what was expected of them.

Christine claimed that RC#4 had modes of communication, but that there was not much collaboration going on. She stated:

...the meetings were – they would have just, you know, kind of like department meetings, and the communication would be about department needs or complaints

about administration or about what's not right – what's wrong with the kids. So it wasn't a discussion about what's gonna be best for kids it was just a discussion about what I need and what's wrong with education today.

***Theme 2: Lack of communication and collaboration - composite structural***

***description.*** All six participants recognized that there was a need at his or her site to have organized communication and collaboration that focused on student learning. Bob recognized that there was collaboration happening at his site, but it was not “organized collaboration...there were teachers that cared about things in the same-subject area that would get together informally.” Mario stated that prior to implementation, there was not a focus on *learning*, but on *teaching*. There was no collaboration or accountability around instruction.

Christine claimed that RC#4 had modes of communication, but that there was not much collaboration going on. She stated that the, “communication was there but most teachers worked in isolation and they had the belief about what works in their class and with their students.”

Alvin explained the rift that existed between staff members, especially between administration and the rest of the staff. He stated, “It was us against them. It was teacher versus admin. Classified versus admin. They did not talk about instruction. When we had meetings my first year, it was...complaint, complaint, complaint, complaint, oh yeah...kids.” Alexis experienced a similar divide. At LA#1, she referred to a “huge chasm between the administration and the faculty – the staff.” She noted that there were not existing relationships. She stated:



I was surprised that the teachers that had taught there for years- didn't know each other's names even. The only thing they had towards the leadership structure was like, a department chair. But even then, their whole role was to sign off orders. But they didn't really do anything as far as what I would consider leadership.

**Theme 2: Lack of communication and collaboration - essence.** The participants quickly pointed out that prior to the implementation of PLCs, there was a lack communication and collaboration going on around what mattered most – student achievement and instructional practices. Their perceptions about the underlying reasons for this ranged from a lack of leadership and accountability to a lack of relationships among staff. Some believed that there were staff members who were stuck in a rut of selfishness, and that communication was about expressing what they saw wrong with leadership, students or education. They felt that while there were some teachers who cared enough to initiate collaborative practices with their colleagues, that there was a lack of accountability and communication in general, which led to their staff not truly understanding what was expected of them. The rifts among staff members allowed for a culture of isolation and perpetuated misconceptions about what are the best practices for student achievement.

**Theme 3: Overcoming staff resistance.** The single most noted barrier during implementation was referenced by all six participants as *staff or teacher resistance*. Each of the participants experienced a degree of unwillingness on the part of some staff members to adapt to PLCs as a way of being. Four of the six schools stated that the resistance was due mostly to not wanting to share their students' achievement data. Three

of the six schools blamed “veteran” teachers for the most resistance. Table 8 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of Overcoming Staff Resistance.

Table 8

*Overcoming Staff Resistance*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	227-228, 247, 289-290	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers were resistant to sharing their data</li> <li>They were concerned that data would be used in the evaluation process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The most resistant were veteran teachers</li> <li>Staff did not see the value in PLCs</li> <li>Teachers were suspicious about the use of data</li> <li>Teachers were afraid data would be used for evaluation purposes</li> </ul>
RC#2	315, 322, 344, 378, 409, 414-415	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Veteran teachers were especially resistant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers did not want change</li> <li>It is hard to change</li> <li>There were staff members that didn't like the kids</li> </ul>
RC#3	272, 588, 609, 682-684	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The first barrier was buy-in.</li> <li>Especially when something is mandated, there is going to be resistance</li> <li>Teachers were concerned that data would be used in evaluations</li> <li>Some teachers were cancerous to individual teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff was uncomfortable with data transparency</li> <li>They had difficulty with facing the brutal facts about instruction and learning results</li> <li>They did not want to implement because they were not seeing any progress</li> </ul>
RC#4	39-40, 47-48, 155, 160	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change is difficult</li> <li>Teachers did not want to look at data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers were resistant to change without any particular reason</li> <li>Teachers held beliefs that they knew best</li> <li>Mainly veteran teachers were resistant</li> <li>Staff did not know what to do</li> <li>They did not believe in PLCs</li> <li>There were staff members that didn't believe that all kids can learn</li> </ul>
LA#1	311, 341, 358	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The main barrier was individual teachers</li> <li>PLCs were mandated</li> <li>There was discomfort with sharing achievement data</li> <li>There was less than 50% buy-in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PLCS meant less time for teachers to do their own thing</li> <li>Teachers did not want to work harder</li> <li>PLCs are more difficult</li> <li>Some teachers were just resistant to anything that required more work</li> <li>There were staff members who wanted to make it hard for everybody</li> </ul>

(continued)

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
LA#2	90, 353-356, 430-431, 450-451	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers would not participate</li> <li>• Some teachers were helped to leave</li> <li>• Some teachers left on their own</li> <li>• Some teachers retired</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers made excuses for not being successful</li> <li>• Teachers don't want to open up</li> <li>• PLCs are an uncomfortable process</li> <li>• Telling them what to do doesn't work</li> </ul>

***Theme 3: Overcoming staff resistance - composite textural description.*** Each participant stated that staff resistance was a challenge during implementation. Mario referred to this issue as “buy in”. He stated that the first barrier they addressed during implementation was the lack of buy-in from staff. He asserted that the biggest barrier, “...is always teacher buy in because, especially when it’s mandated, there is going to be resistance.” While there were individuals who were “cancerous” to their individual PLC teams, he stated that there were not any staff members who were “cancerous’ to the entire process.

Bob stated that the PLC process is more difficult and, “...requires the teachers to put in more time and effort into really analyzing things and making changes and self-reflecting.” Another reason for staff resistance was that many of them did not want to have other staff members looking at their students’ achievement data. Ed stated that his teachers were resistant to sharing their data with one another. They made it clear that they were suspicious about the purpose of doing so and questioned whether the data would be used in the evaluation process.

Each participant expressed how he or she worked with resistant staff members. Some of their responses formed the themes that follow. All six participants created Leadership Teams that consisted of colleagues who helped bring resistant teachers on-board. All six claimed that having trusting relationships with staff helped them to move

the PLC along. Three out of the six principals alluded to mandating PLC collaboration, and four out of the six suggested that they used formal evaluation processes to remove resistant teachers from their sites for refusal to collaborate.

***Theme 3: Overcoming staff resistance - composite structural description.*** The theme of staff resistance was prevalent in all six interviews. The participants expressed disappointment and frustration about their encounters with resistant staff members. For each of them, students were at the center of their intentions in PLC implementation and PLCs seemed an obvious way to move their sites forward. They were frustrated with staff members who appeared to place their own interest before that of students.

Ed perceived that some teachers did not see the value or believe in the PLC structure, and most resistance came from “veteran” teachers. Alexis referred to resistant teachers as the ones who “...don’t want to open up,” because, “...they don’t feel comfortable.”

Alvin expressed frustration about the difficulty in dealing with resistant staff. He stated:

There are people that will never change and that’s just who they are and there’s nothing we can do about it....change was so hard for them and they think that there’s a hidden agenda in change. I think the literature talks about how all people have this innate human desire for student success. I think that’s untrue. I think there are some people who really don’t like kids and they still teach.

Christine reflected at length about staff resistance and her perspective on why it happens. She stated:

The biggest challenges are those that are resistant to change – those that are not willing to move out of their box. We call them ‘on-board-terrorists’ -those that try to poke holes in the ship just because, ‘I want to poke holes in the ship’. No rationale. That’s the biggest thing. No reasoning for it. Another challenge are those that don’t believe in it. I had individuals that don’t believe that my kids can learn. And so... when you don’t believe my kids can learn, you’re not believing what the data is showing you. Resistance comes from teachers not really wanting to take a look at that data and using that data effectively because they think they know best... Those that are showing resistance are more so the old school teachers - those that have been here for a while and they like how things were and they’re just resistant to change because change is difficult.

Bob claimed that his “biggest barrier” was “individual teachers that don’t want to buy into it” and there is an individual in every group who “wants to make a hard time for everyone.” Four of the six participants said that staff members were resistant just for the sake of being resistant. Bob felt that staff perceived PLCs as more work. They felt that this structure was harder than working in isolation and encroached on their time to do their “own thing”.

***Theme 3: Overcoming staff resistance - essence.*** All six participants recognized that any type of change could breed conflict. During the interviews, they expressed that the majority of the staff were compliant with the mandates and most were willing to do

the work to become PLCs. There was a minority at each site that presented problems through resistance, mainly not effectively collaborating with their colleagues. The participants perceived that there were no substantial reasons for refusing to become PLCs and expressed disbelief about their refusal. They cited several possible reasons for resistance, all of which suggested refusal due to personal beliefs. Three of the six participants stated that the resistant staff members either did not like students or did not believe that they were all capable of learning. They blamed veteran teachers for the most resistance. All six participants used Leadership Teams with strong teachers as a way to get resistant teachers on board, along with highlighting successes and using data to make a case for change.

**Theme 4: The importance of a leadership team.** The concept of creating a Leadership team to organize and carry out the implementation of PLCs emerged from each interview. Before rolling out the PLC structure to the rest of the staff, all six participants created some form of a team of teachers that were trained prior to rolling out the PLCs to the rest of the staff. Table 9 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of The Importance of a Leadership Team.

Table 9

*The Importance of a Leadership Team*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	124-125, 127-128, 203, 329-330, 610	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The team trained off-site and then came back and trained staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Leadership Team created buy-in</li> <li>The Leadership Team was the greatest inspiration</li> <li>The team was very influential</li> <li>The team sold the school on it</li> </ul>

(continued)

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#2	35-36, 47-50, 189, 190, 275, 381	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The team was purposely made up of the “power players” and “dominant teachers”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Leadership Team empowered certificated and classified staff</li> <li>He always took anything major to the leadership team</li> <li>There was a shift from “he” or “she made the decision” to “we”</li> </ul>
RC #3	351- 353, 670, 752, 887	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administration handpicked Leadership Team members</li> <li>Members were chosen through an interview/observation process</li> <li>The team was trained</li> <li>Leadership Team took information back to the staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>He got the right leaders in place on the Leadership Team</li> <li>He demanded a lot from the leaders</li> <li>He supported them in what they need</li> <li>The team was provided opportunities to learn and lead</li> </ul>
RC#4	45, 53, 81-87, 202	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was an administrator assigned to every PLC</li> <li>They held regular meetings (formal and informal) to create trust</li> <li>The team started with administration and department chairs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership team got others on-board</li> <li>The team consisted of strong department chairs</li> </ul>
LA # 1	146, 266- 267, 271- 273, 325, 426	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Leadership team allowed for teacher to be involved in decision-making</li> <li>The team was run by teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The team included members that were willing to confront difficult people</li> </ul>
LA#2	89-90, 139- 140, 542	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The team was made up of teachers</li> <li>The team was involved in the change and making the change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The team was provided with autonomy</li> </ul>

***Theme 4: The importance of a leadership team - composite textural description.***

All six participants created Leadership Teams in the early stages of implementation.

Alexis reflected that her first step in implementation was getting the teacher leadership group together, which they called the *Design Team*. Mario selected Leadership Team members by handpicking them through an interview and observation process. All six participants first trained their Leadership Teams in PLCs practices, who in-turn, trained

the rest of the staff. Ed stated that the whole process was done through the Leadership Team.

***Theme 4: The importance of a leadership team - composite structural***

***description.*** The theme of creating a Leadership Team was prevalent in all six interviews. Each participant credited the Leadership Team for the successful implementation of PLCs at their site. All six participants felt that it was through the Leadership Team that each participant began the process of empowering his or her staff, and included staff in decision-making. Each participant described his or herself as a democratic or bottom-up leader who believed in transparency of information and an open-door policy. The Leadership Team allowed for them to include teachers in leadership positions and further the implementation process.

Alexis stated that the team was “very influential” in getting the necessary buy-in from staff and their work was the “greatest inspiration” for implementation. Alvin credited the shared responsibility with the Leadership Team as the catalyst for the formation of PLCs at his site. He stated, “They started to understand – ‘Oh...he’s asking *us* questions’ and ‘Oh...*we* make decisions – not *he* makes decisions’. And I think once you started switching from – *he* made the decision – or *she* – depending on the format of your leadership – to *we*, that’s where a PLC really begins.” He used the leadership team as an opportunity to empower his staff. He compared the team to a superintendent’s cabinet. He stated, “If there is anything major – always take to a leadership team. Very similar to the way a superintendent always talks to or relies on his cabinet, to get their input.”

Alvin formed the Leadership Team choosing his “power players”. He stated:



You make sure those players, whether they're good or bad, are on your Leadership Team. I made sure my biggest anti as well as my biggest supporter was on there. I picked dominant teachers that understand that kind, and who had the ability to talk-up a program and defend themselves against power players who may have taken them down.

Christine referenced having “the right people on the bus” – the right people on “on-board” the Leadership Team. These people included:

...the right department chairs participating – the ones who are willing to take that chance and look at data, and they're on board to making changes, not afraid to voice their opinion if they disagree- that's every important because I don't want them to just say, ‘Okay’ and then not agree and move on. I want them to be able to have that conversation. So, trust is a big factor – trusting that they can have that kind of conversation with myself and the other administrators.

Bob formed his leadership team by selecting who he stated were his “best teachers.” He stated, “These guys are leaders; they aren't afraid to speak up and they're not afraid to take some thrashing from their colleagues that don't agree with them, and they're willing to fight back a little.” Mario put whom he perceived were the “right leaders in place,” and four of the six participants referenced forming a team of teachers who were well-respected and who people listened to.

***Theme 4: The importance of a leadership team - essence.*** All six participants knew the importance of having the right people in shared-leadership roles. By handpicking influential and respected leaders to implement PLC structures, they formed Leadership Teams that they perceived people trusted. These teams created buy-in from

the staff, including some of the most resistant staff members. The participants credited their Leadership Teams for successful implementation. They felt that a combination of clear expectations, shared responsibility, and autonomy allowed the teams to use their individual strengths to compensate for individual weaknesses.

**Theme 5: Using resources of time and money.** While there were many referenced resources mentioned in the interviews, the two that were present in every participant response included time and money. The participants stressed that without these two resources, PLC implementation would not have been possible. Three of the six schools utilized funds from a grant. Five schools used funds to create late-start days for teacher collaboration; two of the schools, including the one that did not implement late-start days, used funds to create common preparatory periods built into the regular school-day for collaboration. Table 10 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of Using Resources of Time and Money.

Table 10

*Using Resources of Time and Money*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC #1	30, 43, 44, 138-139, 323-324, 358, 571-575, 707	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was grant money (compensation)</li> <li>• There was time (weekly collaboration)</li> <li>• There were twice a month late starts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to pay people helped a lot</li> </ul>
RC #2	545, 548-550, 551-552, 553	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a common prep for collaboration</li> <li>• Time was built into the regular schedule because there were not funds to compensate for additional working time</li> <li>• It was voted into bell schedule by teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was important to show that you respect their time</li> <li>• It was a structural support that continues to be embedded in the school day</li> </ul>
RC#3	117-118, 155, 180, 337	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a common prep for collaboration</li> <li>• There were monthly data team meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative time gave them the opportunity to open up and create trust</li> </ul>

Site	Line #s	Structural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were late-start days</li> <li>• There was compensation to leaders</li> <li>• The district made a financial investment in a web-based data system</li> </ul>	
RC#4	38-39, 103, 135, 168, 329	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were late-starts</li> <li>• There was grant money (S3 Grant)</li> <li>• Collaboration time was built into bell-schedule</li> <li>• There were regular meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was important to provide opportunities for staff to learn and collaborate despite lacking funds</li> </ul>
LA#1	149-150, 182-183, 296	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was paid release time</li> <li>• There were late start days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was protected collaboration time (2-3 times a month)</li> </ul>
LA#2	129-130, 236, 246, 258-259, 553	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a grant (Smaller learning Communities);</li> <li>• There was compensation to participating staff</li> <li>• There were late-start days for professional development and collaboration time</li> <li>• Administration provided subs four times a year for additional training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administration showed they believed in PLCs because they were investing in it</li> <li>• They needed the money in the beginning</li> </ul>

***Theme 5: Using resources of time and money - composite textural description.***

The sources of funds, including grants and district budget money varied, but what the sites did with the funds did not. Every site used funds in order for compensation to teams or leaders for their time or for creating time for teams to collaborate.

Christine stated that they implemented “regular meetings” so that teachers could collaborate. Alvin needed funds in order to be creative with the bell schedule. He created a schedule that allotted each teacher two preparatory periods – one for the teacher to use for personal business, and the other for department collaboration. Bob used funds to create “release time” for teachers – protected collaboration time at-least two to three times a month.

Ed stated that grant money allowed him to compensate Data Team leaders for their time gathering and analyzing data, sharing the data with their departments or the

people on their Data Teams. Alexis reflected that she was awarded a grant that sustained implementation. The *Smaller Learning Communities Grant* and the *High Priority School Grant* afforded her the opportunity to, "...pay teachers if they wanted to come in as a team and design work around this type of framework."

Anna commented on the district's financial support to RC#3 through its commitment to providing the sites with data. The district provided a web-based data systems that allowed staff to upload their common assessments and retrieved scores for the purpose of discussing student achievement data and instructional practice. All six participants referenced having such as data system as well.

***Theme 5: Using resources of time and money - composite structural description.***

When asked about the resources needed to implement PLCs at their sites, every participant stated that time and money were the most important resources that they used. Money was a means to either provide compensation to PLC leaders for their time or to create time within the regular school day for teachers to meet. Mario stressed the importance of compensating leaders. He asserted that a leader has to commit to give his or her leaders a little compensation for the additional work that they do to move a PLC forward. Alexis stated that they needed money at the beginning. Without those funds and the implementation of bi-weekly late-starts, they "...wouldn't have gotten anything done."

***Theme 5: Using resources of time and money - essence.*** All six participants reflected that without time and money during the implementation process, they would not have been able to provide their staff with the necessary supports. Time was stressed as the most important resource due to the structure of collaboration. However, without

money, creating that time would not have been possible. The leaders who further compensated their Data Team or PLC leaders, reflected that compensating these leaders for their time and effort was important due to the demands on their time as well and showed staff that administration valued it enough to invest in it.

**Theme 6: Building relationships.** All six participants reflected on the importance of building relationships with their staff. Aside from the need to collaborate around student data, as needed in a PLC structure, they stressed the importance of having strong inter-personal relationships with all stakeholders. Four of the six schools also alluded to building trust amongst staff. Table 11 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of Building Relationships.

Table 11

*Building Relationships*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	364-365, 380-381, 496-497, 585, 630- 634	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They created the same goals to improve things for kids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People enjoy working there</li> <li>Teachers liked the principal</li> <li>There was a leader the staff believed in and trusted</li> <li>The staff knew they were better than their scores showed and there was enough camaraderie that they were willing to work together to prove it</li> </ul>
RC#2	15-16, 22- 23, 47, 136, 187-189, 569	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They started by building relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important to know the history of the school</li> <li>It is important to know the personal sides of people</li> </ul>
RC#3	470, 659, 841, 840- 844, 998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important to make connections</li> <li>They did team-building activities during professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They were a relationship-driven staff</li> <li>A leader must build trust</li> </ul>

RC#4	69-71, 137-142, 170-171	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They created time for informal and formal gatherings</li> <li>• They conducted team-building trainings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There must be trust to have open conversations</li> <li>• They made sure there were connections with people</li> </ul>
Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents (continued)
LA#1	45, 523-547	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers got together informally</li> <li>• They built trust with staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have to try to keep good relationships</li> </ul>
LA#2	14, 129-130, 181, 588	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They did ice-breakers</li> <li>• They implemented Critical Friends groups</li> <li>• They focused on building community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is clear the relationships amongst staff are now solid and deep</li> </ul>

**Theme 6: Building relationships - composite textural description.** As their new principal, Alvin did not have existing relationships with his staff but reflected that before embarking on their PLC “journey” together, he first had to start with “just building relationships.” He stated, “You definitely need to go back and relationship build. That’s the key – really to go and get to know your staff, get to know their quirks, get to know the things they find important and the ones that they don’t.” In order to build relationships with staff, these leaders all stated that they became familiar with their staff on a personal level. When Alvin first introduced the vision of functioning as a PLC, he realized that without relationships, the resistance would be great. He reflected:

At that point, I realized that we had to go even further backwards, so we just started with relationship-building. Getting to know people, sending out birthday announcements...getting to know their families, doing activities where we do. We did barbeques at football games – before the games – anything I could possibly do

to just build relationships with people – to get to know them – and try to let them know that I’m not here to threaten them...just to let them know – I’m not going anywhere – I’m going to be with them – we are going through this together and go through that process.

Alexis asserted that building community was the way that they were able to get implementation off the ground. Working on relationships and community building during late-start days helped to lay a foundation for the difficult work of PLCs. Anna referred to team-building activities, and Alexis stated that they did ice-breakers at the beginning of every staff meeting. All six of the participants referenced allotting time for the purpose of getting to know their people.

***Theme 6: Building relationships - composite structural description.*** Bob reflected that the fact that his staff had trusting relationships with him, made implementation possible. He stated that they would come to him and ask for help when they needed it.

Ed asserted that the strong relationships he had with his staff prior to implementation made implementation possible. He stated:

Because the teachers liked me, we were able to get it through. They would’ve done anything for me, I think at that point...and... so that helped a lot...I guess if you wanted to generalize that, you’d have to get a leader – a principal that the staff believed in – that the staff trusted – and that’s pretty important.

Anna also felt that the relationships at RC#3 were very strong. She credited the relationships for the ability to implement a PLC structure with high expectations. She stated:

We can all joke together, we can smile, we are a very relaxed – not relaxed staff – but a very relationship driven staff. And that comes across whenever anybody comes...Everybody loves everybody here. And, it is true, we have a very welcoming, relaxed atmosphere, but I think everybody knows that when there is an expectation or there is something that we bring up, we bring it up, it needs to be done. Because we allow them to be the experts. Until they aren't.

Christine stated that personal connections with staff were what helped to the trust she needed to have with her staff. She stated that she had to make sure she had connections with her staff to keep them safe from negative influences when the “enemy got in their ear.” She built relationships through informal and formal interactions.

Christine stated,

Where you're building trust and actually building that true relationship are the informal meetings -spending time -providing them the opportunity to come to me at any time, having an open-door policy, making sure I'm available for them. That's the biggest thing.

***Theme 6: Building relationships - essence.*** Whether there were existing relationships, or whether the participant had to create the relationships, all six participants asserted that strong relationships were an integral component to implementing PLCs at their site. The level of transparency and trust needed to create a culture of collaboration was well understood by each leader from the start. Whether it was the administrator's relationship with his or her Leadership Team, or the relationship of the teachers amongst each other, they all stated that building positive relationships was what made the



implementation of PLCs possible. Relationships were foundational for building trust, breeding loyalty, and establishing connections with one another. There were no easy steps presented – just taking time to get to know the people that make up the staff.

**Research Question # 2: What Are The Lived Experiences of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region Sustaining PLCs at Their Sites?**

**Theme 1: Facilitating ongoing communication and celebration.** While there were challenges and barriers, each participant faced such challenges through ongoing *communication* and *celebration*. All six participants referenced ongoing communicating with their staff about expectations and goals, as well a way of celebrating when staff members met those goals. Table 12 illustrates the invariant constituents present in each interview related to the theme of Facilitating Ongoing Communication and Celebration.

Table 12

*Facilitating Ongoing Communication and Celebration*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	400-401, 746	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They had a staff member of the month award</li> <li>• They explained to the staff what they were doing and how they were going to do it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication was one thing they did “pretty well”</li> </ul>
RC#2	78, 88- 89, 204- 205, 299, 450, 473	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They had cross-departmental presentations to keep informed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He “drilled” the information into them</li> <li>• He overwhelmed them with positive energy</li> </ul>
RC#3	76-77, 159, 788, 805, 812	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs presented goals and accomplishments, strengths, weaknesses and gains</li> <li>• They celebrated in the bulletin/flyer and at staff meetings (at least once a month)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was an ongoing process</li> </ul>
RC#4	141-142, 144, 200-201, 281	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each department presented at staff meetings (a best practice)</li> <li>• They showed positive gains every year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They showed appreciation for their work</li> </ul>

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents (continued)
LA#1	413-414, 438, 461, 468	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They created and communicated structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication was not directive</li> <li>• It was important to show successes and prove to them that PLCs were improving student achievement</li> </ul>
LA#2	64-65, 216, 420, 517,615, 624-627	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrated successes</li> <li>• Used a coaching model for communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership was a sounding board</li> <li>• There was transparency in communication</li> </ul>

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***Theme 1: Facilitating ongoing communication and celebration - composite***

***textural description.*** All six participants acknowledged the importance of communicating expectations and goals, and celebrating successes in order to sustain the work of the PLCs. Five of the six participants stated that they celebrated with their staff often, for some, at every staff meeting.

Christine shared that RC#4 has seen “positive change every year” and they “celebrate that.” Anna stated that they “make it a point to celebrate every month at every staff meeting and recognize staff.”

***Theme 1: Facilitating ongoing communication and celebration - composite***

***structural description.*** The predominant belief was that all six participants perceived celebrating success as an important task. Alexis stated that celebrating the work of LA#2’s Design Team was important. She stated, “I think when you have your pioneers, that you need to really provide them support and attention.” Ed stated that communication was something that they “did well.” He reflected, “We told all the staff what we were doing, what we were planning on doing – we sent them to training.”

Alvin credited celebrating successes for furthering staff buy-in. He stated, “Then we had a huge year and that was a good sell because they are starting to see, ‘Okay, he’s not crazy. If I make this change, I see the end result.’ ” Bob credited celebration with creating buy-in as well. He stated that by, “...showing success and proving to them that this is improving student achievement, teachers are like, you’re right – we’ll give it a go. We understand.”

Ed said he did not celebrate well, but he recognized it as something important and aimed to do a better job of it in the upcoming school year. All six participants felt that celebration was not only a means of recognizing individuals for their good work, but also a means for repeatedly highlighting what was important to the site. Celebration was directly aligned with their collaborative goals, and highlighting reaching those goals reinforced their beliefs and work, furthering motivation to continue working in PLCs. Mario pointed out that through celebration, staff “started to see gains” and Christine felt that by highlighting success and showing appreciation, her staff felt empowered.

***Theme 1: Facilitating ongoing communication and celebration - essence.*** For these six PLC leaders, communication and celebration was an ongoing process. Cross-departmental presentations, highlighting successes, and showing appreciation, provided support, recognition, and attention to what the PLC members collectively saw as being important. Communication and celebration helped to empower staff and further buy-in. For all six schools, celebration was directly aligned with their collaborative goals.

**Theme 2: Using professional development to promote PLC work.** All six participants stated that ongoing professional development was an integral part of both implementation and sustainment of a PLC. Table 13 illustrates the invariant constituents

present in each interview related to the theme of Using Professional Development to Promote PLC Work.

Table 13

*Using Professional Development to Promote PLC Work*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	58, 221	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff was trained</li> <li>• Staff was provided mentors</li> <li>• They used DuFour literature: Three big questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff needed to understand what a PLC is</li> </ul>
RC#2	192-193, 219, 223, 231, 268, 436, 528, 539-541, 192-193	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers self-selected professional development</li> <li>• They trained them how to analyze data</li> <li>• Literature used included DuFour literature/worksheets</li> <li>• Used additional literature and multi-media about leadership/customer service/inspiration</li> <li>• Used research and studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development was continuous</li> <li>• The principal attended any positive training he could so that he could remain positive</li> </ul>
RC#3	53, 65-68, 386, 507, 530, 991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature included: Doug Reeves, DuFour: PLCs, Ruby Pane: cultural norms, Response to Intervention (RtI)</li> <li>• There was Data Team training</li> <li>• They were trained how to analyze and create common assessments</li> <li>• The Leadership team provided templates to PLC teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing training was needed - they trained and retrained everybody so they are on the same page</li> <li>• They used data to see where they were in reaching their goals</li> </ul>
RC#4	66, 76, 119-122, 168, 178	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They provided academic coaches and training for teachers</li> <li>• The county provided AVID training</li> <li>• They provided data</li> <li>• The county provided AVID training</li> <li>• They provided data</li> <li>• They provided academic coaches</li> <li>• They attended PLC trainings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The professional development had a clear direction</li> <li>• He believed that all professional development should start with the phrase, "research says..."</li> <li>• The professional development had a clear direction</li> <li>• He believed that all professional development should start with the phrase, "research says..."</li> <li>• The staff revisited their ESLRs</li> </ul>

to make sure their beliefs were aligned with the work

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents (continued)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They used the DuFour model and other resources to fill in the gaps</li> <li>• They received principal notebooks with resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff revisited their vision/mission through the WASC process</li> </ul>
LA#1	149-150 ,163, 190,  266, 296	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Leadership team created PLT notebooks</li> <li>• Literature included: DuFour/PLCs</li> <li>• They were trained on how to create team norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The trainer from Solution</li> <li>• Tree was not effective</li> <li>• Teacher-run professional development was more effective</li> <li>• Professional development was facilitated by teachers</li> </ul>
LA#2	498-499	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They trained them and created a common language</li> <li>• They were trained on how to use protocols to give feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The leader should be a support/resource</li> <li>• Professional development was very coordinated</li> <li>• The key was to make sure the professional development was focused on the same thing</li> </ul>

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***Theme 2: Using professional development to promote PLC work - composite***

***textural description.*** Professional Development was discussed by each participant while discussing both the implementation and sustainment of the PLCs at their sites. The researcher included it under Research Question #2 due to the emphasis on *ongoing* professional development by the participants. During implementation, professional development was focused on the structure and components of a PLC; specifically on how to collaborate effectively around student achievement and instruction. All six participants used the word, “training” to describe one component of their professional development. Five out of the six schools referenced using Richard DuFour’s trainings and literature.

LA#2 did not assume the label of a “PLC” school and never used DuFour literature or trainings during professional development, but embedded the key components into their culture.

One resource that was present in all six participant interviews about professional development was data – using student achievement data and existing research about best practices to determine the needs of the site. All six participants alluded to professional development being facilitated by the Leadership Team and by teachers within each PLC. Teachers then continually selected additional professional development based upon their needs. As illustrated in Table 12, every site included the basic components of a PLC into their professional development. However, as the PLCs progressed, the ongoing professional development varied from site to site and was dependent upon the perceived needs of the teachers at each site.

Alvin identified professional development as a focus for his site. One resource they used consistently was data, but staff members were also allowed to attend any training they deemed necessary. Bob explained that his staff conducted its own professional development. The Leadership team was responsible for going to conferences and them coming back to present it to the staff. This team created PLT notebooks with templates that, “guides them on the effective tasks that they should do as a professional learning team.” The teachers who attended the conference created a PowerPoint and presented to the staff.

***Theme 2: Using professional development to promote PLC work - composite structural description.*** All six participants stated that professional development was ongoing. Alvin stated, “You have to constantly be keeping up with all of the factors or all

of the data that then blend together to create your school” and this could only be done, according to him, through “continual professional development.” Anna used professional development to get everyone “on the same page” so that everyone was “talking the same language.” He accomplished this by training all of his staff on how to be a PLC and then retraining new staff as needed. He stated that professional development is, “all about getting together and looking at the needs of our students.”

Alexis stated, “Professional development is huge.” She pointed out that staff should align professional development with the visions and mission of the site for meaning and relevancy. She stated, “...you do have to keep it around the same thing and you align your resources.” Alvin asserted that all necessary literature is out there to train and support staff – the data and resources are out there. He stated that all professional development should include the phrase, “research says...” He referred to data as being “cold” – something that even the most resistant of staff members cannot argue with.

***Theme 2: Using professional development to promote PLC work - essence.***

Ongoing professional development was a key component of PLC implementation for all six schools. In addition to the initial PLC protocol trainings, each site embedded ongoing, collaborative, and relevant, professional development into their regular bell schedules. All six participants stressed the need for such professional development on a foundational level in order for PLCs to be effective.

**Theme 3: Using common practices for PLCs.** An emerging theme among all six interviews was the actual implementation and practice of common PLC structures and components. Table 14 illustrates the invariant constituents for the evidence of Using Common Practices for PLCs.

Table 14

*Using Common Practices for PLCs*

Site	Line #s	Textural Invariant constituents	Structural Invariant constituents
RC#1	65, 81, 264, 274, 298, 694	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff created a pyramid of interventions</li> <li>• Staff created essential learnings</li> <li>• Staff formed data teams</li> <li>• Staff created common formative assessments, common units, and common summative assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The PLC structure has gotten staff collaborating</li> </ul>
RC#2	116, 118- 119, 195, 197, 601, 611-612, 616-617, 626, 648	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff began collaborative/tiered teaching</li> <li>• Staff identified “Power standards”</li> <li>• Staff created common benchmark assessments, common formative assessments, and common labs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLCs have empowered teachers</li> </ul>
RC#3	131, 144, 208, 230, 247, 253	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff identified “power standards”</li> <li>• Staff created common assessments</li> <li>• Staff used data</li> <li>• Staff discussed instructional practices</li> <li>• Staff identified significant subgroups</li> <li>• Staff determined academic pacing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff used student data to sort and look at different variables</li> <li>• They used data to gage where there needed to go</li> <li>• It was a fluid, changing reality with PLCs</li> </ul>
RC#4	17-19, 254, 257	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff created benchmarks</li> <li>• Staff completed equity cards</li> <li>• Collaboration took place in content areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff used data to inform instruction and make sure students were achieving</li> </ul>
LA#1	45, 96-97, 109, 168- 169	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration took place in same-subject-same-level teams</li> <li>• Teachers established norms</li> <li>• Teachers identified essential learnings</li> <li>• Teachers created common quizzes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating protected time laid a foundation for discussion</li> </ul>
LA#2	14, 27-28, 52-53, 129- 130, 621	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers looked at student work and data to measure progress</li> <li>• Staff formed Critical Friends groups</li> <li>• Staff used the procedures from “Working on the Work”</li> <li>• Emphasized learning</li> <li>• Staff learned protocols and structures for PLC facilitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They believed that they are all responsible for all students</li> <li>• Staff is now more reflective in their practice</li> <li>• The formation of late starts helped build community</li> </ul>



***Theme 3: Using common practices for PLCs - composite textural description.***

All six participants spoke of the common PLC components during their interviews. They had all revisited their missions and visions, created group norms, and then began the collaborative work around student achievement and instruction. Alexis explained that they set them up in small groups with a facilitator. They looked at student work together, and utilized a specific protocol.

Alvin explained that teachers created common labs and common assessments. He stated, "... it was almost like if you stood in between their classrooms, you could hear them almost on the same word. In each grade-level, there are common pacing guides now and common assessments – four benchmarks. During CAHSEE, all the 9<sup>th</sup> graders take a practice CAHSEE. So, we can now evaluate them for the future. And then, during, STAR testing, we realign all the EAP stuff within the STAR testing."

Christine reflected on the collaboration amongst staff members in content areas. He stated that, "With that collaboration, they're utilizing student information, data, grades, and curriculum, to inform their instruction to propel and make sure students are achieving." All six schools stated that their teachers have identified essential learnings and created common summative assessments. Three of the six participants noted that their staff has also created and implemented common formative assessments. All six mentioned that PLC teams are using data and results from common student assessments as a basis for discussing instructional practices. Three of the six schools mentioned that teachers are discussing interventions and significant subgroups – they are sharing responsibility for all students and putting interventions in place to help them be successful.

***Theme 3: Using common practices for PLCs - composite structural***

***description.*** The participants did not comment on the effectiveness of the products produced by their PLC teams, but all six of them appreciated that collaboration was happening in most of their PLC teams. Anna explained her philosophy behind the collaboration and the products it produced. She stated:

We figure they are the experts on their area, so they need to determine pacing and so that is one of the first things they do is look at okay, what did we do last year? Where that would be one of the first data team meetings this year is, what is the CST scores telling us? Where do we need to hit? And so they will create their pacing and rework – a little, not a completely start over every year. But they will look at what pacing needs to be changed to – to facilitate the best for this year so we are looking at – we kind of stress that every core team should have a pre-middle and post exam as well as small and intermediate.

All six participants stated that “most” of the teams were strong but there was at least one team at each site that was struggling or resistant to full PLC implementation. Ed reflected on such superficial collaboration that took place. He stated:

I think a lot of the departments just gave me stuff because I was principal and I was asking so it was just ‘Give him this – it I’ll make him happy’. And, I have a whole drawer full of our essential learnings that I probably really haven’t even looked at because I knew they were just giving me the fluff.

Ed felt that one of the things that PLCs did was it got teachers working with each other - It made all the teachers much more collaborative.” Bob reflected, “I think that PLCs laid a foundation that they can collaborate and discuss with each other –

professionals with the same subject.” Alvin reflected that because they were “so in line” and “so together as an instructional team”, teachers empowered each other. Alexis felt that the role of administration in PLCs is to, “... really help people learn to be more reflective in their practice.” Alvin explained how his effective PLC teams saw a benefit in the collaboration:

I would say the ones who had common assessments - all the classes that gave it, used the results to reassess their pacing guides and lessons. And you saw the growth because they were doing that. So the geometry example, there were 3 teachers – they all were in-line together – and then what they would do is the would end and then if the scores were lacking or something they would look at what everyone missed and then they would include it the following year.

***Theme 3: Using common practices for PLCs - essence.*** Although there was not a research question that probed for the completion of or the fidelity of the implementation of PLC components, all six participants spent a considerable amount of time highlighting the PLC components that were happening on their campuses. They appeared proud of the work that their PLC teams were doing and highlighted the growth that had come of it.

A pervading theme within each interview was that while most of the staff had formed and sustained PLC teams, especially in the core subjects such as Language Arts and Math, every site still had some PLC teams that were not collaborating effectively or around student achievement data. Not all teams had common assessments and even if they had them, not all teams were using the results from them as a basis for discussion about instructional practices.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experience of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to implementing and sustaining PLCs at their sites. The aim was to glean the significant challenges and barriers faced by these sites as well as the effective strategies and tools to overcome those challenges as evidenced through the analysis and coding of one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Six administrators from Riverside and Los Angeles Counties in Southern California participated in interviews about their experience implementing and sustaining PLCs at their sites. Responses to their one-on-one in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to understand how leaders experience the implementation and sustainment of PLCs at secondary sites.

Chapter 4 presented the findings from interviews with the six participants. The findings suggested nine themes in regards to their experiences. There were six themes under Research Question # 1: (a) PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores, (b) lack of communication and collaboration prior to PLC implementation, (c) resources of time and money, (d) overcoming staff resistance, (e) the importance of a Leadership Team, and (f) building relationships. There were three themes under Research Question # 2: (a) facilitating ongoing communication and celebration, (b) using professional development to promote PLC work, and (c) using common practices for PLCs.

Chapter 5 includes an analysis of the findings in relation to the two theoretical frameworks that guided this study. This chapter combines information about the findings

that either support or add to the current literature. Chapter 5 further contains discussion about the following: (a) findings and interpretations, (b) recommendations for secondary school leaders, (c) recommendations for further research, (d) theoretical implications, and (e) a summary.

## **Findings and Interpretations**

**Implications of demographics on data.** The most significant demographic findings affecting the data include (a) highest educational degrees earned (b) credentials held, and (c) years of experience in leadership positions (Table 1). The demographics of the participants suggest a highly educated group of adults who value their own continual personal learning. They each had several levels of experience in education that contribute to the richness of the data. All of the participants had been teachers for at least 5 years prior to assuming administrative roles, suggesting that they knew the position of a teacher very well. Each participant had been a high school administrator for at least 5 years as well, suggesting that each had extensive educational leadership experience.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

**Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region implementing PLCs at their sites?**

**Theme 1: PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores.** All six participants stated that there was a need at their sites for which they felt PLCs were the only solution. Three of the six referred to PLCs as “common sense” or an “obvious” approach to school improvement – their beliefs were very strong in the power of PLCs to move their schools forward.

The literature suggests that stakeholder collaboration and input are necessary for all students to succeed. According to Bender (2009), stakeholders must frequently consult with another for any reform effort to work. Senge (1990) articulates a view of the workplace as a *learning organization* including the active participation of employees in creating a shared vision and culture to support collaboration so that they can work together more effectively in identifying and resolving problems (Feger & Arruda, 2008). Establishing a purpose and direction give the leader an opportunity to sell the problem that is the catalyst for the change – the staff must see, acknowledge and understand it (Bridges, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

This study supports the current literature in that these six participants – these six high school leaders - recognized that the only way they were going to make lasting change at their school sites was to create a professional learning community where all stakeholders worked together to solve their unique problems. In the beginning, they used the site's low API scores in order to help the staff to see that they were not meeting the standards set forth by the state or the country. Implementing PLCs allowed them to begin the process of facilitating guidelines and procedures to ensure purpose and direction. They were able to enact a collective inquiry on teaching and learning (Hord, 1997).

What does not exist in current PLC literature is the emerging theme of not using the label of *Professional Learning Community* at all. Throughout the literature, there are many names for it : *collaboration* (Noas et al., 1999), *collegiality* (Barth, 2001; Little, 1991), *professional community* (Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), *discourse communities* (Putnam & Borko, 2000) *professional learning community* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hall & Hord, 2001), *culture of experimentation*, *self-monitoring*

*team, communities of continuous inquiry* (Schmoker, 2006), *schools that learn* (Leithwood, 2002) and *communities of practice* (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). However, two of the six sites in this study did not call their actions anything – they simply practiced the common components. A third leader, introduced the concept to the staff as PLCs but allowed his teams to create their own name to avoid resistance – *Professional Learning Teams*. These participants experienced successful implementation and sustainment of PLCs at their sites without ever referring to their actions as PLCs. While one staff coined their own term for the collaborative teams, two others felt that labeling the process anything would have hindered progress. They alluded to the common attitude that school staff are often overburdened with new programs and initiatives that require tremendous amounts of energy and resources only to later be replaced with newer ones. The one school that felt PLCs had atrophied is a good example of this. The leader consistently referred to *doing* PLCs again, yet had not were fully implemented some of the common components, including using data from common assessments to inform instructional practices. This finding suggests that the most effective PLC components could be identified and sites could integrate them into existing structures and resources with the same, if not more success than most PLC sites have.

**Theme 2: Lack of communication and collaboration.** Prior to the implementation of PLCs at their sites, all six participants experienced a degree of lack of communication and collaboration with their staff. As explored in Chapter 2, the literature suggests that educational leaders are trying to address the pervasive cultures of isolation on secondary campuses (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2009; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schmoker, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The findings of this study add to the existing literature, indicating traditional schools are not structured or led in a way that allow teachers to share expertise and learn from each other. Instead, they are stuck in a tradition of isolation. Secondary schools are traditionally structured in a way that departmentalizes groups of teachers by content area. In larger schools, teachers rarely communicate let alone collaborate with staff members outside of their subject area. As seen in these schools, even within content areas, there was rarely specific collaboration time where even teachers of the same subject were able to collaborate with one another. The result was generally isolated teachers who taught what they wanted, when they wanted to, with little accountability, direction or communication.

There is little literature that highlights the unique challenges that secondary sites in face the implementation of PLCs. In general, secondary sites are much larger than elementary and middle schools – they have hundreds, if not thousands more students and therefore more teachers and support staff. Although the participants did not discuss this phenomenon specifically – they never suggested that their sites were different than elementary or secondary schools, they did discuss phenomena specific to secondary sites. They highlighted the barrier of staff resistance, which is a larger hurdle with more staff members. They discussed the challenge of including all teachers, especially those from non-core subjects such as elective courses. They discussed the difficult task of identifying power standards and creating common assessments. They discussed the hurdle of lack of time for collaboration around these components. All of these difficulties are present for any school regardless of level; however, in a school with thousands of students and hundreds of teachers, they are multiplied.



**Theme 3: Overcoming staff resistance.** All six participants experienced a degree of staff resistance for a variety of reasons. The invariant constituents included unwillingness to change, reluctance to share student achievement data, and resistance to change itself. Three of the six participants noted that “veteran teachers” were the most resistant overall.

According to the literature, a good leader recognizes that even with planned change comes conflict, and conflict is uncomfortable. As Bennis (1989) warns, “Make whatever grand plans you will, but be prepared for the trivial and unexpected to interrupt them” (p. 42). In addition, King and Newman (2000) contend that one of the factors is the instructional climate. Climate encompasses the people or human factors and the way the people *feel* about the ways things are done (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004). Despite the merit of any reform, several authors reflect on the importance of considering the people that make up the organization because they, being the ones who change, provide the most effective route for accomplishing systemic change— acting separately and together (Fullan, 1993; Hord, 1987) .

The literature contends that leaders must aide the individuals in making the psychological redirections that they must make if the change is to work (Bridges, 2009). This study adds to the body of literature, supporting the notion that staff resistance to such change is a factor during implementation. Leaders must tend to the change process and to individuals who are resistant to change before they can move forward.

**Theme 4: The importance of a leadership team.** All six participants recognized the important role that their Leadership Teams played in implementation. It was through

the Leadership Team that they introduced the concept of PLCs to their staff and organized the necessary structure for implementation.

The existing literature suggests that effective leaders share responsibility and decision-making. There are many terms for this style of leadership including *shared leadership*, *distributive leadership*, *facilitative leadership*, and *service leadership*. These forms of leadership involve the shared responsibility and decision making of all stakeholders in an organization. This form of leadership strays from the traditional top-down model and involves *energizing* and enabling individuals throughout all levels of the organization to make good decisions and do better things (Fullan, 2006). An educational leader can be any staff member who takes on the task of decision-making functions through shared leadership (Elmore, 2000; Hart, 1994; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; King & Newman, 2000; Neufeld & Roper, 2002; Poglinco et al., 2003; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halversob, & Diamond, 2001). In a PLC, administrative leaders accept this shared power and decision-making with teachers – they build collegial relationship with teachers, and promote and nurture the development of leaders at all levels (Hord, 1998). The leader equips the team, establishes the direction and then allows for a certain degree of autonomy in obtaining the goals (Collins, 2001).

The findings support the existing body of literature about shared leadership in that each site empowered teacher leaders at their site and shared decision-making processes with them during implementation. In doing this, they strayed away from the top-down model of leadership, sharing the role. These Leadership Teams were empowered to take on the role of leaders and organize, learn, and train the rest of the staff. Each participant recognized such a team as a foundation to creating PLCs. The literature suggests that

leaders model what they expect – inspirational leaders themselves work in teams as they expect their staff to and use the same iterative process of collaborative brainstorming (Hord & Sommers, 2008). These leaders enacted collaboration from the start by including the Leadership Team in the planning and facilitation of PLC implementation.

**Theme 5: Using resources of time and money.** All six participants cited time and compensating teachers as the most significant resources used during implementation. They used funds to compensate leaders for their time and to create time within the regular bell schedule for teachers to collaborate.

Existing literature contends that the institutional features such as size, time for instructional planning, and funding are two factors that affect student achievement (King & Newman (2000). In a PLC, supporting these factors is important. Supports take the form of cultivating school policies and structures that foster collaboration. Examples of this include creating time and space for teachers to convene (built into the master schedule) during the regular instructional day (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Reichstetter, 2006). This includes providing and protecting schedules and structures that reduce isolation and promote effective communication school-wide (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Many, 2009; Reichstetter, 2006).

The literature suggests that due to lack of resources, leaders have to be creative with time, (Bridges, 2009). Because implementation is not prescriptive and every site is different, leaders must be innovative in how they create space and time for collaboration - how they introduce PLCs and become part of it *with* the staff. Leaders will also have to be creative in how they equip teams, including soliciting external support for essential

resources such as funding, technical and political support from all levels of federal, state and community partners (Hord, 1997).

The findings connect to the literature in that each participant, regardless of sources or levels of funds available to them, were creative. Participants compensated PLC Team Leaders to collect data, disaggregate it, train colleagues, and facilitate collaborative meetings. They created common preparatory periods within the school day or implemented late-start days. Each participant knew the importance of protected collaboration time, and made it happen for their sites. They supported their teams with first - time and second - money.

**Theme 6: Building relationships.** All six participants cited strong relationships as foundational for PLC implementation. Building positive relationships with staff was what helped them overcome barriers and staff resistance.

The literature recognizes that leaders will experience conflicts during implementation or change. It suggests that while a leader cannot eliminate conflict, they can manage it. One measure of a leader is how well they can encourage the tolerance of diversity among staff and invite differences in opinions. An effective leader can facilitate staff in learning from one another while managing conflicts that arise (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The only way to do this is through building relationships.

Leaders must tend to the organization's climate and take heed to the feelings of the individuals in it in order to ensure the crucial cultural shift that can survive in it (Bridges, 2009; Covey, 2004). Culture effects climate and vice versa. If people do not trust, respect and deal candidly and openly with one another, there is no chance to build a culture of collegiality and collaboration (DuFour et al., 2008). PLC schools are

characterized by caring relationships where staff work together and change their pedagogy in pursuit of achieving their vision (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The leader must staff relate to one another, including through social activities.

The findings of this study support the existing literature in that all six leaders instinctually knew that in order to make PLC implementation possible, they had to cultivate positive, open relationships with all stakeholders. Every participant either had positive working relationships with their staff members prior to implementation, or made it the first priority when implementation began. Relationships were not limited to professional settings, but extended to social settings in a personal and caring environment.

**Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region secondary site leaders sustaining PLCs at their sites?**

**Theme 1: Facilitating ongoing communication and celebration.** Two things that helped to sustain the PLCs at all six sites were clear and open communication of expectations and regular celebration of small successes.

Existing literature states that communication is more than just written memos and informative briefs at faculty meetings. It is imperative that leaders recognize, as Hord and Sommers (2008) state, that "...ultimately, communication is the message others receive, not the message we think we are sending" (p. 33). McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) encourage the development of ongoing communication, common language and collaboration across department boundaries. Leaders should give people information over and again (Bridges, 2009). It is important to establish structures for feedback as well.

Lines of communication should remain open, becoming a sharing of information with democratic participation at voluntary regularly scheduled meetings - at least once a month (SEDL, 2001).

In order to build momentum, leaders must take time to recognize and celebrate every small win that brings the team closer to achieving its curricular goals (Schmoker, 2006). They should obsessively acknowledge what they want to see more of by celebrating accomplishments. This should happen at every faculty meeting – at least once a week. The recognition can come from leadership or from staff nominations about anything that the community deems to be important. Since the idea is that staff should be able to enjoy the impact of their efforts on a frequent and ongoing basis, PLC teams should craft goals that foster short-term wins or *quick successes* (Bridges, 2009) and create structures that allow people to see that their hard work is *paying off* (Schmoker, 2006).

The findings support the current literature. All six participants stated that open and ongoing communication and transparency made sustaining their PLCs possible. They reflected that the ongoing celebration of successes – both big and small – are what propelled continued action and re-affirmed their beliefs and work. The literature suggests that due to the collaborative nature of PLCs, teachers experience reduced isolation and a *sense of community* along with a increased sense of efficacy and motivation (Louis & Kruse, 1995) and *shared responsibility* for the development of all students (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

According to the literature, high levels of collaboration - strong-teamwork across all grade levels – is one of the nine characteristics of high performing schools (Shannon &

Bylsma, 2007). Lines of communication should remain open, becoming a sharing of information with democratic participation at voluntary regularly scheduled meetings - at least once a month (SEDL, 2001). As a leader, one should also ensure that they communicate the vision to students, parents, and community supports (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and that there is a system created for feedback (Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

**Theme 2: Using professional development to promote PLC work.** Part of being a PLC means making professional development an ongoing and personal process. The six participants in this study reported that their staff self-selected relevant professional development based upon student achievement data.

In a PLC, professional development is personal and applicable through the observation and adaptation of instructional approaches in order to meet the needs of real students both *thoroughly* and *systematically* (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The continuous inquiry ensures reflection on instruction and results (Schmoker, 2006). This approach to professional development results in powerful learning as it builds knowledge base and technical skills, increases effectiveness, creates a deeper understanding and meaning to content areas, and fosters an appreciation for vertical articulation of skills and competencies. All of this helps teachers to help students to achieve higher standards while identifying areas of weakness in their own instruction (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Ongoing and collective learning results in an expanded collection of ideas, materials, and methods (Little, 1991) and a transfer of best practices (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Thus, in a PLC, professional development is both ongoing and relevant. Teachers select

the appropriate professional development in real-world settings, then implement and reflect on it.

The findings research significance connects to the literature in that the leaders supported continuous and relevant professional development selected by and facilitated by teachers. Teacher selected the necessary professional development based upon current student data and research-based best practices in education. Professional development was purposely aligned with the collective goals and had a clear direction and focus. Leaders were a support financially and a resource for information as educational leaders.

**Theme 3: Using common practices for PLCs.** For the purpose of synthesizing the various terms and definitions of the components of PLCs, in Chapter 2, the researcher compiled the existing literature into the following three overarching categories which the research indicate are key components of successful PLC implementation: (a) a commitment to accomplishing shared goals for student learning, (b) a collaborative culture, and (c) continuous inquiry, action and reflection (DuFour, 2009; DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 1997). The products of these actions constitute the artifacts – tangible, visible and observable patterns, rituals and skills (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schein, 2004).

*A commitment to accomplishing shared goals for student learning.* The vision/mission of a site must be focused on student learning and be specific to the essential standards and acceptable products of mastery (Doerr, 2009; Many, 2009). Furthermore, Hord and Sommers (2008) assert that a PLC should stay focused on outcomes but stay open on *how* they get there. Goals should contain indicators, timelines, and targets that do not prescribe the methods of attainment (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Many, 2009). Stakeholders should work interdependently (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and



should be involved in its development as well as the utilization of that vision as a guidepost in decision-making (SEDL, 2001).

The findings of this study support the current literature in that each site had a set of common beliefs associated with their work. They created collective commitments to improve student achievement which included artifacts such as a mission or vision, as well as common goals, essential learnings and pacing guides.

*A collaborative culture.* In a PLC, the artifacts – the products of the collaborative teams - include ongoing reflective dialogue, professional growth, and support (Kruse et al., 1995; Little, 1991; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and staff is continuously engaged in collective learning and its application (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Artifacts are the physical evidence that the professionals in the organization are engaged in continuous learning and reflection. One way to gage the level of implementation of a PLC is by creating a portfolio of artifacts and work products. Examples of artifacts created by such a community include (a) documents, (b) PLC meeting products, and (c) protocols.

The findings of this study support the current literature in that each participant described the common PLC artifacts created in collaborative teams. Products such as common pacing guides, common assessments (both formative and summative) and group norms suffice to prove that there are collaborative processes at these sites centered about student achievement.

*Continuous inquiry, action and reflection.* The literature explains that successful PLCs have a culture of experimentation (Schmoker, 2006) which includes high productivity (Haberman, 2004), active research (Schmoker, 2006), and collaborative inquiry (Burnette, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This requires action; it requires

*learning by doing* (DuFour et al., 2008). The concept of *learning by doing* is a form of *reflective professional inquiry* (King & Newman, 2000). Team members use reflective questions about concerns about the school community, determine processes to address the issues, gather data to measure the problem and solutions and then keep track of the process and outcomes. (James et al., 2008). PLCs continually check progress (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Schmoker, 2006), and collect and implement evidence and strategies (DuFour et al., 2008).

In a PLC, there is a commitment to learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and to continuous improvement (Many, 2009). PLC members are continuously learning together (Hord & Sommers, 2008) in an iterative process (Collins, 2001). During this process, there is an honest assessment of students' levels of learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and stakeholders collaborate to learn together about a topic the community deems important (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson & Hammerman, 1996). Staff engage in a regular schedule of formal meetings (Schmoker, 2006) where they collaborate around common assessments (Many, 2009; Schmoker, 2006) and plan for interventions (Many, 2009). There is reflective dialogue (Hord & Sommers, 2008) and reflective professional inquiry by staff members (King & Newman, 2000). Staff analyzes assessment results and encourage the use of data (Many, 2009). The process is one that requires analyzing and applying (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The findings of this study support the current literature in that all six participants described the common PLC artifacts created in collaborative teams. The products of PLCs were obvious and included creating a common vision/mission and examining the

underlying beliefs of the organization: identifying essential learnings/power standards, common pacing guides, formative assessments, summative assessments, and tiered interventions.

The study did present some wonderings that were not present in the literature – the phenomenon that some sites identify themselves as PLCs yet fidelity of the PLC components were not evident. Some of the sites had stronger elements on their campuses than others yet they all credited PLCs for student achievement gains and claimed that they were PLCs.

Fullan (2006) proposes that the effectiveness of PLC leaders should be judged on how well they are able to create the necessary culture of professional learning system-wide.

The findings of this study provide evidence of strategies and resources that may help educational leaders implement and sustain PLCs. However, the PLC process is an ongoing one. A school's climate and culture must be conducive to the collaborative PLC process and a transformation to shared leadership must take place. The participants in this study had to cultivate leaders – they had to co-lead – not lead from the top-down. They had to make expectations clear and demand a lot while providing a degree of autonomy to his or her staff.

## **Conclusions**

Although this study is unique to the participants, and limited to the six participants within two counties in Southern California, it will add to the existing body of literature about the process and challenges of implementing PLCs at the secondary level. Results of this study may help inform leaders and leadership training programs, which

focus on components of PLC structures, and leadership behaviors that initiate implementation and create sustainability of such reforms. This study will also contribute to the existing body of literature on PLC reform efforts and creating a culture of collegiality at the secondary level.

**Key conclusions from the study.** The current study contained nine themes from which the researcher derived five conclusions regarding facilitating successful implementation of PLCs at secondary sites: (a) leaders of large secondary sites must first build community and relationships, (b) PLC administrators must share leadership responsibility with other stakeholders, (c) The Integral PLC components may vary by site, (d) leaders must facilitate ongoing and relevant professional development, and (e) a PLC by any other name is just as sweet.

*Leaders of large secondary sites must first build community and relationships.*

On secondary campuses, where the number of teachers can be in the hundreds, it is important to take time to build a sense of community across department boundaries. Although the purpose of implementing PLCs is ultimately to improve collaboration around student achievement, the findings of this study suggest that leaders must first tend to building relationships with their staff prior to trying to implementing the structures of a PLC. Leaders should make sure that they know their staff members – take time to build relationships with them. The relationships should be collegial, but also personal and social through both formal and informal gatherings. The participants in this study recognized such activities as a foundation for building trusting relationships. When leaders take the time to find out what is important to their staff members – to laugh with them and share with them, and collectively create a place that people love to come to

every day, and then they were able to begin to work together on the professional agendas. The participants in this study cited teacher resistance as the main barrier in implementation and credited positive and trusting working relationships with the tool to overcoming most resistance. With such relationships they were able to create trust, diminishing fear of staff members and opening lines of communication.

*PLC administrators must share leadership responsibility with other stakeholders.* Secondary Schools are typically structured with an administrative team including one principal, and one or more assistant principals. Other leaders include department chairs who oversee academic departments and varying committees. According to the findings of this study, even with such levels of leadership, there can be a lack of communication and shared decision-making. There is often a misunderstanding of the roles and intentions of different leadership groups that causes rifts or mistrust between administration and staff. Because of these challenges, leaders should take the time to form a Leadership Team.

The Leadership Team should consist of respected and trusted staff members representing a variety of stakeholder groups. The Leadership Teams in this study varied concerning their makeup – some Leadership Teams were made of representatives from each department, some teams consisted of department chairs, and some teams had representatives from other governing bodies. Regardless of the makeup, all of the participants alluded to including Leadership Team members who were not afraid of conflict and could defend against naysayers. These staff members were leaders who could empower staff members, inspire them and influence them to collaborate. Such a Leadership Teams should be included in decision-making. They should be trained first

and then facilitate training the rest of the staff. In addition, PLC leaders and Leadership Teams are charged with maintaining ongoing communication with staff and celebrate successes often. It is important to communicate goals and successes to all stakeholders and keep the lines of communication open.

*The integral PLC components may vary by site.* PLC leaders should implement PLC components with fidelity and monitor the artifacts of the teams' collaboration time. As the literature suggests, PLC leaders should invest in their teams by providing structural supports such as money for collaboration time built into the regular school day and compensation to PLC Team leaders.

The participants in this study alluded to PLC components such as common standards, common lessons, and common assessments but spent most of their collaborative time discussing data. As such, they discussed the role that data had in creating a case for change, specifically, existing CST and API scores. When it comes to influencing others to act, it is important to establish a compelling reason for the change. Leaders should use existing student data and share it transparently with their staff. They should use data to motivate them to do better.

The literature suggests that creating a common mission, vision, and values are of paramount importance when implementing a PLC (Burnette, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Many, 2009; Newman, 1996). The participants in this study did allude to the creation of such artifacts when directly asked about them, but spent more time speaking about two products of the collaborative process including common instructional goals and the belief that *all students can learn*. It appears that this

single belief, along with collaboration around common instructional goals are what will help a struggling secondary school in doing the hard work of implementing PLCs and moving forward. The literature suggests that PLCs should undergo the process of creating a shared mission, vision and values, but it may be the process of examining the underlying beliefs and assumptions that has the greater impact, not so much the written product.

***Leaders must facilitate ongoing and relevant professional development.*** PLC leaders should support their staff in embedding professional development into instructional practice. Professional development should be relevant and selected by teachers based upon their perceived needs. Those needs should be based upon the analysis of different variables of student assessment data.

During the implementation process, in addition to the literature available about PLCs, leaders should find literature and other media resources that contain information specific to the needs of his/her site. Although the PLC literature contains valuable information about PLC components, it lacks the important information about creating a culture for PLCs. Leaders should assess the needs of their staff and fill in the gaps with resources specific to the professional development needs of his/her staff. Educational leaders may want to explore the current funding structures and processes in place for professional development. Some of the most successful leaders made professional development a priority and invested in the continual learning of his/her staff.

***A PLC by any other name is just as sweet.*** School leaders may find success by approaching PLCs as a way of being – not as a program. They may want to avoid placing a label on their actions, but rather embed the collaborative reflective practices into

everything that the staff does, beginning by supporting a Leadership Team in the activities such as revisiting existing missions, visions and beliefs with the staff, and using data to make a case for change. The leaders in this study who avoided placing a label on their teams found just as much, if not more success than the ones who did.

**Recommendations for future research.** Findings from this study about secondary leaders experiences with the implementation and sustainment of PLCs suggests possibilities for future research. Future studies of PLC schools could be focused on exploring the following Research Questions related to the findings:

1. The participants in this study were selected based upon a PLC web-site that listed PLC schools. However, the researcher found that there were many more schools that have implemented PLC structures with success yet do not label themselves PLC schools. Future research may include a survey sent to possible participants to determine the extent to which there are sites implementing the PLC components without the title.
2. In speaking about resources, several sites mentioned District office support in the form of resources or programs, a possible research question could investigate if there is a relationship between District support and effective PLC implementation.
3. All six participants in this study specific positive relationships with their staff as a necessity. When site administrators do not have positive personal relationships with their staff, can a PLC be implemented and/or sustain?



4. Is there a relationship between PLC component fidelity and using PLC resources during implementation? What other resources have successful sites included in their implementation and sustaining of PLCs?

### **Theoretical Implications**

The goal of this study was to examine how leaders of secondary sites experience the implementation and sustainment of PLCs at their sites. It was built upon two theoretical frameworks: (a) Social Capital Theory, and (b) Reflective Practice.

**Social capital theory.** The theoretical framework of Social Capital Theory provided a foundation for understanding leaders' experience of implementing and sustaining a PLC. The findings provided support for the theoretical framework of Social Capital Theory in that the structure – the open communication and organized collaboration, facilitated the flow of information, the influence on the stakeholders through social ties, added resources beyond personal capital, and provided identity reinforcement and recognition to the participants (Lin et al., 2008). The cycle of *civic engagement* and *interpersonal trust* allowed the PLC members to pursue joint social objectives” (Putnam, 1995, p. 666). For the participants in this study, the joint social objectives centered around improving student achievement.

Muntaner (2004), claims, that reciprocal relationships increase the sought after productivity due to the creation of, “... norms, networks, trust & other cultural relations” (p. 676). Norms, trust and other properties such as authority and sanctions of a group are essential in the production and maintenance of the collective asset (Lin (2001). This study connects to the concept of reciprocal relationships in social capital in that a foundational task during the implementation of the PLCs at these six sites involved the creation of

common missions and visions. All six participants spoke at length about the need to build relationships with their staff members, creating trust and thereby empowering their staff.

One component of social capital theory as defined by Lin (2008) is *action orientation*. Lin further defines social capital as the resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in *purposive actions* (Lin, 2001, p. 12). The participants in this study emphasized the need to learn by *doing*. The learning of the PLC members was ongoing and purposive. The professional development was purposely selected based upon the data collected from common assessments. Every form of professional development embedded into the PLC was chosen by staff for the purpose of improving student learning.

Social Capital theory is further supported by this study in that the collaborative practices of the staff members at each site *produced profit* (Lin, 2008). The profit or benefit was an improvement in the instructional practices that led to improvements in student achievement. As time went on and student achievement improved, the benefits of being part of the collective group became more apparent to even the most resistant of teachers. The social capital produced by the work of PLC teams.

**Reflective practice.** Reflective Practice is centered around the concept of lifelong learning where in a self-regulated process, the practitioner reflects and analyzes their own experiences in order to consciously learn from them (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Boud et al., 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 1985; Kolb, 1984; Rolfe et al., 2001; Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) refers to this as *reflection on-action* and *reflection in-action*. As discussed in the literature review, one of the very components of PLCs is continuous inquiry, action and

reflection. The participants in this study support the theoretical framework of Reflective Practice through these steps.

Argyris and Schön (1978) pioneered an organizational reflective practice known as *Single Loop Learning* and *Double Loop Learning*. *Single Loop Learning* results in a practitioner using the same policies and procedures in action even after they fail. However, the *Double Loop Learning* practitioner modifies personal objectives, strategies and policies in order to avoid repeating the same errors again which requires the employment of a new frame or systems. Thus *Double Loop Learning* involves the uncovering and remedy of error. It requires a critical analysis that may then lead to a modification of the existing variables and, therefore, an alteration in the way approaches and results are framed. *Double-loop* learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the alteration of an organization's existing norms, policies and purpose. The participants in this study practiced Double-Loop learning when they began implementation of PLCs. With the steps of implementation, staff reflected on their existing goals and aligned their actions to achieve them. They identified essential learnings and power standards and created common assessments. After delivering the common assessments, they looked at the student data and determined the variables that needed to be adjusted to improve the data. This cycle of ongoing reflection in regards to student achievement and instructional delivery is what supports that theory of Reflective Practice.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of six secondary site leaders in the Southern California region as related to the

implementation and sustainment of PLCs at their sites. The purpose was to investigate the implementation and sustainment of PLCs by six secondary site leaders as related to (a) the significant barriers and challenges faced during implementation, (b) the leadership strategies used to overcome presented challenges and barriers, and (c) the leadership strategies used to sustain the PLC over time.

Chapter 5 revisits the nine themes identified in the study. Six themes related to Research Question #1 emerged regarding participants experience with the PLC implementation process. First, each participant saw PLCs as the only way to move forward - PLC steps were implemented to address low API scores. Second, each site had a lack of communication and collaboration prior to PLC implementation. Third, the most pertinent resources were time and money, Fourth, staff resistance was the main barrier or challenge during implementation. Fifth, every leader formed a Leadership Team in order to facilitate implementation and create buy-in with staff. And sixth, building relationships with staff at all levels was a foundation to implementation.

The findings revealed three themes related to Research Question 2 regarding the participant's experiences while sustaining PLCs at their sites. First, ongoing communication and celebration made it possible to sustain the PLCs by keeping all staff on the same page and recognizing successes. Second, ongoing and self-selected professional development made sure that teachers remained supported in reaching their goals. Third, the practice of common PLC components – implemented with fidelity – sustained the work of the teams

Key conclusions resulting from the study include the need for leaders of large secondary sites to first build community and relationships that cross department

boundaries. Second, PLC leaders must share leadership responsibility with other stakeholders, including them in the planning and facilitation of the implementation process of PLCs. Third, while the integral PLC components may vary by site, a common underlying belief is the belief that all students can learn, followed by collaboratively created common instructional goals. Fourth, in order to sustain the work of PLCs, leaders must facilitate ongoing and relevant professional development. Fifth, PLC leaders may not want to label their work at all rather engage their staff in the collaborative professional work without naming it but rather approach it as a way of being.

The study supported the existing literature related to PLC components. It further supports the literature regarding key barriers and complications in implementation, especially in regards to change, conflict and pervasive cultures of isolation and resistance. The existing literature regarding a leader's role in initiating change is also supported by the findings. Leaders have to be creative with the resources that are available to them. They must establish a purpose and direction and then allow staff enough autonomy to take up the batons and be leaders themselves. A leader should be there with the proper structural support, communicate, celebrate, and hold staff accountable. Above all, the findings indicate that leaders of PLCs should first tend to the relational factors and human capacities of every staff member.

The findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study may be generalized to secondary schools in Southern California, especially with comparable student and staff demographics. The findings may not be generalized to all schools as the six sites included in this study are a small representative sample.

The theoretical frameworks of Social Capital Theory and Reflective Practice provided a foundation for understanding the leadership experience of implementing and sustaining PLCs at secondary sites. The study's findings supported the Social Capital and Reflective Practice theoretical frameworks and how they connect to the concept of Professional Learning Communities as a reform.

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## APPENDIX A

## Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please answer each question below. Your answers will be submitted once you click "submit" at the bottom of the page.

**What is your professional title? \***

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Vice Principal
- Dean
- Other:

**Approximately how many students are enrolled in your school? \***

**Approximately how many Staff members do you have? \*** Teachers? Classified? Paraeducators?

**What degrees have you earned? In which subject areas? \***

**What type of educational credentials do you hold? \***

**How many years have you been at this site? \***



How many years have you been employed with this district? Previous positions? \*

How many overall years of leadership experience do you have in education? \*

How many overall years of experience do you have in education? \*

During which school-year did your site begin PLC implementation? \*i.e. 2011-2012

Were you responsible for the initial implementation of the PLC? If not, who was? \*

Do you wish to receive a copy of the findings from this study? \*

- YES
- NO

Additional comments

By clicking "I agree" below, you are agreeing to participate in this study. Your role as a participant, including requirements, rights, risks and benefits are stated in the participant letter dated \_\_\_\_\_. \*Please choose one below:

- I agree
- I do not agree

Please type in your name below: \*

## APPENDIX B

## Interview Questions

*Interviewer:* Jennifer Padilla, doctoral candidate, Pepperdine University

*Interviewee:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Topic:* PLC implementation

*Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Location:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Time Start:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Time End:* \_\_\_\_\_

	Main Question	Possible Probing Questions	Notes
1.	<b>From your perspective, how might you describe your reasons for and rationale behind the implementation of Professional learning communities?</b>	<p>Paint a picture for me of your school prior to the implementation of PLCs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How might you describe the communication between stakeholders?</li> <li>- How might you describe collaboration between teachers and other support staff?</li> <li>- How might you describe the models for coaching and monitoring of instructional practices.</li> <li>- How might you describe the way staff celebrated successes or faced the “brutal facts” of instruction and student achievement?</li> <li>- From your perspective, who made the decisions in regards to academics and interventions for students?</li> <li>- From your perspective, who decided to implement PLCs? Why?</li> <li>- How might you describe the intention or goal behind implementing PLCs?</li> <li>- How did you come to know about PLCs?</li> <li>- How might you describe your steps for establishing a purpose and direction for staff?</li> </ul>	

2.	<p><b>Recall the process of implementation. Describe for me the steps taken and the resources used to create PLCs.</b></p>	<p>How was staff educated about PLCs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What literature did you study when you were beginning to form your PLC?</li> <li>- Describe for me how you went about introducing the concept of PLCs to staff.</li> </ul> <p>In your opinion, what were the most integral resources used during implementation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did these resources exist prior to implementation? If not, who provided them?</li> </ul> <p>As a leader, how did you support staff and create a culture of shared leadership?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did you go about creating a shared vision, mission and values?</li> <li>- What were some of the underlying assumptions that were brought to the surface or challenged during this process?</li> <li>- What processes were used to create a sense of collective responsibility and shared leadership with staff?</li> </ul>	
3.	<p><b>When you think back through the process of moving into a PLC structure, what would you identify as the most significant barriers or challenges faced during implementation? Successes?</b></p>	<p>What conflicts arose during the change process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe for me an encounter of resistance from a staff member and how you went about getting them on board.</li> <li>- How did you go about acknowledging staff concerns?</li> </ul> <p>What resources did you find were lacking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When facing inadequate resources, how did you manage to support staff?</li> </ul> <p>What challenges did you face as a leader or a staff that you could not find the answer to in the literature?</p> <p>How did you deal with ambiguity regarding implementation procedures?</p> <p>How did you address professional development?</p>	

4.	<p><b>As a leader, what did you do specifically, to help yourself or staff to overcome presented challenges and barriers during the implementation process?</b></p>	<p>How would you say your leadership style affected the implementation of the PLC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How would you describe your leadership style?</li> <li>- What would be a specific example of how your leadership style affected the implementation process?</li> <li>- What exactly did you do as a leader that made implementation possible?</li> </ul> <p>As a leader, how did you lead with questions instead of answers?</p> <p>Did courage play a role in your leadership throughout this process?</p>	
5.	<p><b>Take a moment to reflect on your current leadership practices. Now that your site functions as PLCs, what strategies or resources do you use to help sustain the formation and work of the PLCs?</b></p>	<p>How would you say that your leadership style continues to affect the sustainment of the PLC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What would be a specific example?</li> <li>- How would you characterize your current relationships with staff?</li> </ul> <p>Describe the differences you see in your school now that PLCs have been implemented.</p> <p>What do you feel are the most integral resources in making the PLCs <b>sustainable</b>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What physical and structural supports do you tend to in order to make the PLCs possible?</li> <li>- What relational factors/human capacities do you continue to nourish?</li> </ul> <p>How do you collaborate with your staff?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you communicate the struggles and successes to staff?</li> <li>- How do you celebrate successes? How often?</li> </ul> <p>How do you coach and model the characteristics of a PLC member to staff?</p> <p>How do you ensure that staff continues to collaborate around common goals focused on student learning? How do you measure participation?</p>	

## APPENDIX C

## Letter of Permission (Superintendent)

March 28, 2012

Title, Name  
Superintendent  
School District  
Address 1  
City, State ZipCode  
Phone/Fax

Dear Name:

My name is Jennifer L. Padilla. I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy with Pepperdine University supervised by Dr. Christopher Lund. This dissertation study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my dissertation.

The purpose of this letter is to solicit your support and cooperation in my dissertation study. Through this study, I intend to capture the Professional Learning Community implementation experiences of several high school leaders in Southern California. I have selected your district after identifying one or more secondary schools within it that are self-described PLC schools. My goal is to add to the expanding body of research that exists about PLCs, especially in our secondary schools. In my research, I have found that while there is extensive literature about the components of PLCs and their benefits to students and staff, there have been very few studies done that document the **leadership journey**, specifically in regards to the challenges and barriers faced and the effective leadership strategies used to overcome them.

I am requesting your permission to interview one secondary high school administrator and/or other instructional leader from a PLC school within your district for this study. This is a qualitative phenomenological study and will consist of an initial phone conversation followed by a digitally recorded one-on-one-interview lasting 60-90 minutes (not during contractual duty hours). Participants who voluntarily agree to participate in this study will be informed up front that their job status would not in any way be affected by refusing to participate, they could opt to not answer any/all questions, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

In order to protect privacy, a pseudonym will be used for both the administrator and the site. Any identifying information located in my notes or correspondence will be removed prior to publication. Transcripts of the interviews will be available in order for participants to confirm the information provided.

If you choose to consent to the participation of your administrator in this qualitative research, please sign below. Please feel free to contact me with any questions regarding this invitation.

You can reach me at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact my dissertation chair at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Padilla  
 Pepperdine University  
 Graduate School of Education and Psychology  
 6100 Center Drive  
 Los Angeles, CA 90045

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*I consent for secondary school administrators and/or other instructional leaders within the **District Name** to participate in the study by meeting with the researcher by telephone for an initial screening and in-person for an individual interview session. I understand that all responses, schools, and the school district will remain confidential using pseudonyms. I understand that the purpose of the study is to further the research of leadership characteristics and strategies in regards to Professional Learning Community implementation at the secondary level.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

*Note: The participant will receive a copy of this letter for his/her information and the researcher will keep a signed copy in her files.*

***Please mail this completed form back in the enclosed envelope, fax it to***

***OR email it to*** [REDACTED]

## APPENDIX D

## Participant Recruitment Letter

Title, Name  
PLC Leader  
High School  
Address 1  
City, State ZipCode  
Phone/Fax

Dear Name:

My name is Jennifer L. Padilla. I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy with Pepperdine University supervised by Dr. Christopher Lund. This dissertation study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my dissertation. [Rest assured that I have already obtained district consent to recruit you for this study \(See attached Superintendent Authorization\).](#)

Through this study, I intend to capture the essence of Professional Learning Community implementation experiences of several high school leaders in Southern California. My goal is to add to the expanding body of research that exists about PLCs, especially in our secondary schools. In my research, I have found that while there is extensive literature about the components of PLCs and their benefits to students and staff, there have been very few studies done that document the **leadership journey**, specifically in regards to the challenges and barriers faced and the effective leadership strategies used to overcome them.

Having been a California high school ELA teacher, and now a high school administrator in Los Angeles county, I realize that every campus is made up of unique individuals and that every campus, despite location, demographics or API scores, is characterized by a very unique culture. I am also fully aware that despite good intentions, transforming a traditional secondary school into a PLC school is an awesome task. Your participation in the implementation and sustainment of PLCs at your site is no different and I want to know and share with the academic community more about how you did that.

It is my hope that you will accept this invitation to voluntarily participate in this study. Your participation would require four things:

- 1) Completion of a 10 question biographical/demographic questionnaire, detailing your education, experience and basic demographic information about your site (Google Docs form).
- 2) A brief telephone conversation to review the study itself
- 3) An audio recorded 60-90 minute one-on-one in-depth interview consisting of five broad questions and possible probing questions. This interview would be conducted at a mutually convenient place and time (not during contractual duty hours) during the months May through July, 2012.

- 4) Member check: Once I have transcribed the audio recordings of our interview, I will email you a PDF version of the transcription. You will have the opportunity to review and correct the responses before they are published.

**Of course, you would have the right to refuse to answer any questions posed to you.**

The only foreseeable risks in connection with participation in this study are the time and energy required to conduct the brief questionnaire and interview. This will require you to reflect about your experience as a transformational leader in moving your traditional site to one of collaboration. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the study will not affect your standing in any employment, current or future.

There is no direct benefit to you or your site. However, the valuable information that you would contribute could help future sites as they go about planning and conducting the implementation of PLCs at their sites.

In order to protect your privacy, a pseudonym will be used for both yourself and your site. Any identifying information located in my notes or correspondence will be removed prior to publication, and all data collected will be secured in a password protected digital file on my personal laptop and a locked cabinet in my personal home office. This and all other collected data is required to be kept securely for at least three (3) years. At that point, the data will be destroyed.

I would be happy to share a copy of the findings with you when the study has culminated. This information will be available in approximately 6 months. If you wish to receive a copy of the findings, please indicate so on the initial questionnaire.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions regarding this invitation. You can reach me at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact my dissertation chair at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact [REDACTED] Chairperson of the Graduate and Professional schools Institutional Review Board, Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, 6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045, [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]. Consent from your district Superintendent has already been received (see attached consent form).

**If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the enclosed Participant Agreement and return it to me as soon as possible. Additionally, the link to the initial questionnaire can be found below.** I would appreciate it you could complete it within the next week. I sincerely hope that you will choose to participate in this study and I look forward to hearing about your journey.

Thank you for your time.  
Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Padilla  
Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology



I've invited you to fill out the form **Participant Questionnaire**. To fill it out, visit:

**Participant Agreement**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, of **School Site Name**, agree to  
(Print name)

participate in the study *Professional Learning Communities as a Reform: Implementation, Complications, and Implications for Secondary Site Leaders* by speaking with the researcher by telephone for an initial screening, completing a 10-question survey online, and meeting with the researcher in-person for an individual interview session. I understand that all responses, leaders, schools, and the school district will remain confidential using pseudonyms. I understand that the purpose of the study is to further the research of leadership characteristics and strategies in regards to Professional Learning Community implementation at the secondary level. I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing an Ed.D. degree, including a dissertation and any future publications.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jennifer L. Padilla

***Please mail this completed form back in the enclosed envelope,  
fax it to [REDACTED], OR email it to  
[Jennifer.Padilla@Pepperdine.edu](mailto:Jennifer.Padilla@Pepperdine.edu)***

[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX E

## Participant Email

Dear Participant:

Recently, I sent you an email requesting your participation in a research study that will help me to identify the challenges and barriers in PLC implementation as well as the effective leadership strategies that have transformed traditional schools into PLCs.

I know that this is a very busy time of year for high school principals so this email is a reminder, if you have in fact chosen to be a part of this study, requesting that you please complete the online Google Docs form questionnaire. For your convenience, I have re-entered the link below:

I've invited you to fill out the form **Participant Questionnaire**. To fill it out, visit:

[REDACTED]

If you have already completed the survey, thank you for your time. I will be contacting you shortly to coordinate the one-on-one interview.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Padilla, doctoral candidate

Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX F

## Participant Informed Consent

By clicking "I agree" below, you are agreeing to participate in this study. Your role as a participant, including requirements, rights, risks and benefits are stated in the participant letter dated [REDACTED]. \*Please choose one below:

- I agree  
 I do not agree

Please type in your name below: \*

Powered by [Google Docs](#)

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/\[REDACTED\]](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/[REDACTED])

# APPENDIX G

## Google Docs Spreadsheet for Participant Demographic Data

The screenshot shows a Google Docs spreadsheet interface. At the top, the browser address bar shows 'https://docs.google.com'. The document title is 'Participant Questionnaire'. Below the title is a menu bar with 'File', 'Edit', 'View', 'Insert', 'Format', 'Data', 'Tools', 'Form (7)', and 'Help'. A status bar indicates 'Last edit was 23 minutes ago'. The spreadsheet has a toolbar with various editing tools. The main content area contains a table with the following questions in columns B through R:

B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	R
What is your professional title?	Approximately how many students are enrolled in your school?	Approximately how many Staff members do you have?	What degrees have you earned? In which subject areas?	What type of educational credentials do you hold?	How many years have you been at this site?	How many years have you been employed with this district? Previous positions?	How many years of leadership do you have in education?	How many overall years of experience do you have in PLC implementation?	During which school-year did your site begin PLC implementation?	Do you wish to receive a copy of the findings from this study?	By clicking "I agree" below, you are agreeing to participate in this study. Your role as a participant, including requirements, rights, risks and benefits are stated in the participant letter dated _____.	Please type in your name below:	What is your professional title?	Were you responsible for the initial implementation of the PLC? If not, who was?	

At the bottom of the spreadsheet, there is a 'Sheet1' tab and a download icon with the text 'Show all downloads...'.

## APPENDIX H

## Microsoft Word Interview Transcription (Example)

**Abstract** : On date, I met with \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ in between \_\_\_\_\_ and conducted a one-on-one interview with \_\_\_\_\_. Include basic information about location, appearance, start of conversation, etc. Include basic information about location,

**Researcher**: “Verbatim Transcription”

*Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, ...*

**Participant #** : “Verbatim transcription.”

*Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, ...*

**Researcher**: “Verbatim Transcription”

*Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone...*

**Participant #** : “Verbatim transcription.”

*Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone, body language, etc. Insert researcher observations regarding tone...*

**Summary**: Summarize the overall impression of the interview. Note any unanswered questions or new ones. Summarize the overall impression of the interview. Note any unanswered questions or new ones. Summarize the overall impression of the interview. Note any unanswered questions or new ones.

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