TEACHER PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY TEAMS
WITH RESPECT TO THEIR COLLECTIVE INQUIRIES: A CASE STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the perspectives of secondary level teachers in East Tennessee who are involved in Professional Learning Community (PLC) teams regarding both the environment and sharing of best teaching practices. The study examined PLC teams to better understand how the team design, interaction, and the process of collaboration enabled teachers to coexist as adult learners. The basic research question lies in what are teacher perspectives of PLCs relating to the environment of the collective inquiry and the transfer of knowledge at the secondary school level. The study examined PLC teams to better understand how the team design, interaction, and the process of collaboration enabled teachers to coexist as adult learners. The study examined four PLC teams in a rural East Tennessee high school. The teachers were observed and interviewed in their PLC teams, which were classified as focus groups. The focus groups were given an online assessment to better understand their PLC environment at the school. The observations, interviews, and assessments were used to give detailed description of the case and evolved into themes highlighted from the participants. The final four themes evolved from detailed data collection and analysis into relationships, values and vision, collective learning, and structures. The study concluded with recommendations to help rural secondary schools navigate through the PLC implementation process.

Keywords: Professional learning communities, best practices, shared best practices, PLC teams, PLC team interaction, transferring learning, community learning, coaching, teacher learning, assimilation, accommodation, motivation, sustaining, interaction, collective inquiry, job-embedded learning, and exchange.
Dedication

The dedication of my dissertation is to my mother. She lost her battle with Alzheimer’s in December of 2012. My mother finished college to become a teacher. She married and started a family. God challenged her with the responsibility of nurturing a husband and two children. She never became a schoolteacher. God did guide her to a more worthy area of instruction. She taught one Sunday school class for 46 years. She poured her passion into educating children every Sunday of the year. I cannot remember her ever missing a Sunday lesson. The reason I am in education is because of my mother. I owe my career to her hard work and dedication to the field of educating children and establishing the path for many other children to become stewards of this great and noble cause. “When all else fails, Jesus is always there.” Dortha “Dot” Pratt (My Mom)
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List of Abbreviations

First To The Top (FTTT)
Race To The Top (RTTT)
Professional Learning Community (PLC)
Annual Measurable Outcomes (AMO)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)
Building Level Leadership (BLL)
Building Level Leadership Team (BLLT)
Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
End of Course (EOC)
Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The educational structure in rural America has remained constant throughout the years with the use of long summers for summer breaks. This has led to an adaptation of the educational calendar to match the rest of the nation. The end result of this practice led to months of students never applying educational skills over summer vacation. The small rural school in many areas has gone by the wayside and evolved into a consolidated, centrally located county school system.

By the turn of the century, rural and urban school years were brought into conformity as the physical distance separating the two areas shortened. At this point, the urban school year had been decreased to 180 days, and the summer was seen as an ideal break period because of hot temperatures and family vacations. (NCSBA, 2011, p. 1)

The 180-day calendar is typical to most public schools, and many rural school districts never consider if it is adequate for students who are living in a different time and facing new challenges (NCSBA, 2011).

The idea of students, teachers, parents, and central office stakeholders sharing common bonds or educational communication has also gone away in many areas. In one small rural high school, the idea of communication changed in the summer of 2009, as the school system embarked on the mission of incorporating Professional Learning Communities. This case study investigated the educational make-up of professional learning communities and the teams that are a part of this educational movement.

Background

The essential role of the high school teacher has changed since the inception of No Child Left Behind (107th, United States Congress, 2002). This was apparent with the introduction of
more stringent measures of accountability set forth by the United States Department of Education grant titled Race to the Top (RTTT). Tennessee was one of two states to be awarded the initial allocation of 501 million dollars (United States Department of Education, 2010). The objective of Tennessee’s plan was to develop highly skilled teachers, visionary leaders, and effective schools (Tennessee Department of Education: First to the Top, 2012). The Race To The Top (RTTT) initiative evolved into the state of Tennessee’s First to the Top (FTTT) in the summer of 2010 (Tennessee State Report Card, 2010). Professional development was a key aspect of the FTTT change along with accountability of school systems, schools, principals, and teachers. The development of schools must be student-data driven, and include all members of the learning community. The leaders of Tennessee’s schools of tomorrow “must assess their school context and student data, promote shared decision making across the school community, implement best practices by mobilizing immediate action, and hold themselves and others accountable for sustaining student success” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 1). This is the guiding principle of a school transforming into a professional learning community.

The concept of professional learning communities (PLC) was introduced in American public schools nearly 50 years ago in the form of research to study the isolation endemic in the teaching profession (PLC, 2011). “The term professional learning community actually emerged from organizational theory and human relations literature; it is where educators continuously seek to find answers” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 11). Everyone expressing their aspirations, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities together (Senge et al., 2000), further developed the PLC movement from the idea that schools can learn. The development of the term professional learning community has been defined, expanded, and reproduced over the last 20 years. Several authors in the educational setting aided the growth of PLCs: Shirley Hord (2009),
Richard DuFour (2008), and Robert Eaker (2008). Inspired by past research and their own experiences, they each explain the concept of the total re-culturing of a school and the strategic planning of PLCs.

The willingness to create a shared vision, shared leadership, and a collaborative culture is a very promising endeavor for all schools and districts. Many schools had regularly scheduled staff development sessions; however, much of what was done in these sessions was not pertinent in terms of affecting student achievement (Marzano, 2003). The action of staff development, professional development, and professional learning should not be tedious PowerPoint presentations, ponderous lectures from presenters who lack classroom experience, and high-decibel whining about the state, children, parents, teachers, or public education (Reeves, 2010).

Professional development should be the driving force of the school; its stakeholders, and its leadership learning how to be effective stewards for all students. DuFour and Eaker (2008) asserted that professionals in their field of expertise must work through an ongoing study, constant reflective practice, and highlighted with a commitment to continuously improve. Professional development is no longer considered an isolated event for which the principal plans pre-year workshops (Ackerman, 2009). DuFour (2011) explained that all professionals including doctors, lawyers, and pilots are required to work with others on a regular basis to ensure they made well-informed decisions. The shift change highlighted teachers working together and learning together in teams; they then work together building the collective capacity necessary to create a culture of success that improved school performance and student achievement (Fulton & Britton, 2011). The overall development of the professional in the field of education would no longer be a solo endeavor; the individual in the school system is a single stakeholder which would become a part of a team in the overall scheme of how the student should be educated.
Sharing and collaboration are the components of building a learning community to help all students, teachers, and administrators. The professional learning community is the development of an environment in which all stakeholders and participants have a voice and collectively share a single vision (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). “There is an abundant amount of research on the development, implementation, sustainability, and structure of PLCs” (Vesico, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 90). Conversely, Feger, Arruda, Pringle, and Briggs (2008) concluded that rigorous research and evaluation studies of PLCs are limited in number. The research and evaluation of PLCs was an area of need. The evaluation of the framework or design of a PLC that best fits the school system checks for understanding within the PLC teams in the school. Vesico, Ross, and Adams (2008) expressed the need for more “In-depth case studies of changes in teaching practice and student achievement for sample teachers working in PLCs” (p. 90). As stated earlier, the major contributors and researchers in these areas of PLCs, Hord (2009), DuFour (2008), and Eaker (2008), have developed strategies to assess the fundamental process of PLCs. Their work led to developing assessments, plans, and protocols to aid schools in the phases of school re-culturing and school reform.

The works of Hord, DuFour, and Eaker provided the overall process of PLCs and the PLC system of implementation and sustainability. Much of the practitioner literature on PLCs has described the processes and stages that occurred along the developmental trajectory (Feger, Arruda, Pringle, & Briggs, 2008). The problem arose from the limited results pertaining to how PLC teams work, evolve, transfer knowledge, develop best practices, and share instructional practices. Reviewing the literature showed limited areas of research concerning the PLC model; however, an emerging movement of studies highlighted a critical review of PLC models (Feger et al., 2008). The research highlighted their impact on teaching practice and student
We need a better understanding of the collaborative processes in schools that lead to desirable outcomes for schools and those they serve. To do this, we must go deeper in looking at concepts such as dialogue. The process must go deeper to understand the processes and tools that can be used by PLCs or those supporting them; not well intentioned by mechanical tools, but more sophisticated processes and tools based on research that both helps promote understanding of and engagement with the idea and practice of PLCs with particular reference to people's own contexts, as well as promoting self-evaluation, reflective inquiry, dialogue, collaborative learning, and problem solving. (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 6)

This qualitative case study addressed the gap in literature and added to the small amount of literature investigating the inner workings of a PLC model in a rural secondary school in East Tennessee.

Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, and Olivier (2008) defined best practices in a team as peers meeting and observing one another to provide feedback on instructional practices, to assist in student learning, and to increase human capacity. The use of the term best practices comes from the idea of sharing teaching strategies. This was defined as reflective dialogue and collective inquiry into best practices of curriculum, formative assessments, instruction, professional development on lessons and effective instructional strategies (Reichstetter, 2006). The idea of best practices and the sharing or transferring of practices was the building of higher expectations for students and stakeholders, improving instructional practices, and increasing student learning and achievement outcomes (Reichstetter, 2006).

There were small amounts of emerging literature that look critically at PLC models and
their impact on teaching practice and student learning in the classroom (Feger et al., 2008). This research provides PLC teams, administrators, principals, and district leaders a unique insight into the inner workings of teacher collaboration and the positives or negatives associated with this action at the secondary level.

The study followed the theoretical frameworks of Albert Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive learning and Jack Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. Bandura (1977) described social cognitive learning as the observing and modeling of behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others that occurred within a social context or social setting. Using Bandura’s framework and the basic understanding of social interactions of professionals in the field of education, teachers and administrators become adult learners and share knowledge of the collaborative process defined in the PLC process. Social cognitive theory highlighted the process that people learn through observation and modeling appropriate behavior, intrinsic reinforcement, and learning that exists without demonstrating new behaviors (Bandura, 1977).

Mezirow's theory (1991; 2000) of transformative learning explained the ability to develop autonomous thinking: “In contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others” (Mezirow, 2000, p.5). Adult learners use their experiences and memories to judge change in their lives. Mezirow (2000) explained that adult learners acquire a body of experiences that frame the reference and define their worlds. Adult learners then use assumptions through which they their experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

The idea of differentiated learning styles of students was very similar to differentiated learning styles of the teachers. The overall understanding of student and teacher learning can be a positive factor in the educational setting. Since Mezirow (1991) stated adults use past
experiences to define their understanding of change and to judge others by these areas, the team must understand all members come into the process of adult learning with social and educational backgrounds.

Levine and Marcus (2010) suggested future research was needed to link specific transferring of best practices or ideas and the sharing of best practices or ideas to see the strategies implemented with fidelity or devotion to the students in the classroom. The results of Levine and Marcus’s research were tied directly into the field of PLCs and the team aspects of collaboration and transfer of knowledge. The influence of what teachers learned together or researched together directly benefited the teaching imparted to the students (Levine & Marcus, 2010). The open-ended view of the landscape of workplace learning and the environment in the context of teacher education showed learning in the workplace and the learning environment was valuable to the success of a school’s climate and culture (Maaranen, Kynaslaht, & Krokfors, 2008).

**Situation to Self**

The motivation for conducting this study was to understand the inner workings of a PLC team and the process by which its members transfer knowledge among group members, along with a desire to see the process of implementation of transferring knowledge in their classrooms. The collaboration process and the learning community are intriguing to me; the process of a team and the sharing of the team to help all students has been the motivation for the development of my educational career.

The philosophical assumption for this case study was epistemological, therefore, I wanted to get as close to the participants as possible. This meant the research process would lead to collaboration, spending time in the field with the participants, and becoming an insider in the
inner workings of a PLC team (Creswell, 2007). I wanted to lessen the distance between the participants and myself. I conducted the study in the field where the participants lived and worked; this was important for understanding what the participants experienced and shared with each other (Creswell, 2007).

The epistemological assumption that addressed my stance on the qualitative case study was defined by Creswell (2007) and required me to collaborate and spend time with participants. The paradigm was my basic set of beliefs that guided the research action; this was the focus of the outcomes of my study. The paradigm in this case study was constructivism, defined as the use of broad and general questions so that the participants constructed the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with others (Creswell, 2007). I focused on all aspects of PLC teams and the questions about the inner workings of the team.

My relationship with the participants was as a nonparticipant during the research process. Creswell (2007) noted that “Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p.21). I observed the PLC teams’ meetings and interviewed the teams. The nonparticipant view led to a participant viewpoint to help with the process of being able to funnel the observations from a broad picture to a narrower one (Creswell, 2007). This approach helped to limit the assumptions and biases that I carried from my educational setting into the participants’ educational setting.

Problem Statement

The problem was the limited amount of research available involving the basic understanding of the perspectives of teachers who are involved in professional learning community teams, specifically regarding the transfer, sharing, and discussion of learning in a
rural secondary school setting. This qualitative case study brought forth the in-depth components of PLC teams in a rural secondary school setting. The vast majority of research in the area of PLCs deals with dimensions, set up, subject area teams, elementary school teams, and middle school teams (Vesico, Ross, & Adams, 2008). This instrumental case study explored the less-researched area of secondary schools and the vastly unknown areas of rural schools in America. Feger et al. (2008) suggested a need for the development and indexing of case studies for the varied circumstances, levels, and demographics in the area of PLCs. I attempted to identify protocols established by PLC teams and the basic establishment of their interactive collaborative norms. The instrumental case study magnified the concept of how collaboration meshed with teacher learning. This was an area in which there was a lack of research and information. The research conducted was in Grizzly County Schools (pseudonym) at the only county high school.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to understand the perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community teams regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. At this stage in the research and analysis, teacher perspectives of professional learning community teams was defined as the understanding of research-based collective inquiry of best teaching practices and their sharing of best teaching practices within their PLC teams. DuFour and Eaker (2008) defined collective inquiry as the process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group or team explored together. The viewpoint of the teachers from four PLC teams within one high school gave an in-depth look at how the teachers assimilated, accommodated, communicated, transferred knowledge, planned, and solved problems in PLCs. The exploration of secondary school
teachers in the rural high school setting allowed for the understanding of factors that aided or posed as barriers in sharing or transferring best practices in the collaboration process.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study was that it would shed light on the function of the PLC team; therefore, the concept of identifying best practices within a group of educators and having the ability to transfer the knowledge obtained from the individual instructional setting was a key component of my research. The benefit gained was the community effort to ensure all students were in a scope of work within the goals for the school. This study examined the abilities of the PLC teams to collaborate and share knowledge, which were the instructional lessons obtained and the classroom management practices shared as adult learners.

In school systems across the state of Tennessee, leaders are facing many challenges and hurdles. To educate the same way as in decades past is not going to boost student achievement to the necessary levels to prepare students for the global career markets. To obtain American entry-level jobs over the next 10 years, students applying for these positions will need to be proficient in algebra, geometry, data interpretation, probability, and statistics (Friedman, 2007). The school must adapt to this new demand or students will be left behind and poorly prepared for the next steps in their lives. The idea of professional learning communities is not a new approach, and the preparation, research, and sustainability have been studied (Vesico, Ross, & Adams, 2008). The understanding of the team itself is the area of uncertainty. The school has to include shared leadership and vision. The *sine qua non* (2010) of a PLC was the ability to have collective inquiry with other professional educators in a team to solve problems at their school (DuFour & Eaker, 2008). The *sine qua non* was defined as the something that is absolutely indispensable or essential or without which something is not possible (*sine qua non*, 2011).
Professional learning communities opened the doors for understanding and teaching all children (DuFour & Eaker, 2008); however, this was a very difficult task, in which schools were led down a path that was out of their comfort zone. In general, many secondary school teachers did not openly communicate problems from classroom door to classroom door. When students struggled in a secondary school, many times they were simply left behind, or the individual teacher had to compensate in his or her lessons to play some form of catch up with a student. The collaboration process characterized in a PLC team was a systematic process in which teachers worked together to analyze and improve their classroom practices (DuFour, 2004). A natural part of school reform was to identify what was involved in the process of teamwork and collective inquiry. The secondary school teacher could not solve the problems of student achievement alone; he or she must work together with one common team goal.

This instrumental case study also explored rural educators in East Tennessee and their ability to work within a PLC system as a team. Hipp et al. (2008) suggested that teachers work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities. This was vital to the rural educators in Tennessee simply because many schools were isolated from major educational institutions. The rural schools must collaborate internally and externally with other rural schools. The problems facing communities are funding issues and lack of sustainable income. The effort of a single teacher changing a school’s process of learning alone is overwhelming. The team concept of PLCs is new to many areas of rural Tennessee, and a case study to understand the PLC team could open doors for other secondary schools to band together for a common goal and produce a productive workforce and college prepared graduates. The collaborative spirit could unite communities with other communities and rural schools with other rural schools across the state of Tennessee.
The goal of all schools is to meet all annual measurable objectives (AMO), whether they were from the federal government or the state government. This study explored the process of best practices and the sharing of best practices of four PLC teams in a rural high school. The process of best practices and the sharing of best practices was the focal point of this study. The mindset change in Tennessee’s educational make-up has changed 180 degrees, and the focus is on improving teachers and helping struggling schools (Anonymous, 2011). The accountability for schools, teachers, and leaders is at an all-time high, and being prepared for all avenues was the most viable option for success. This study added to the existing research on professional learning communities by creating a greater sense of sustainability.

The results of the study should encourage other school systems to investigate their professional development programs and restructure their concepts of collaborative learning and leadership. The key concepts of collaboration and collaborative activities can both facilitate and constrain what teachers can learn together by influencing what teachers make public from their own classrooms, their teaching aspects, the degree of specificity of teaching, and the kind of information that is shared about students (Levine & Marcus, 2010). Caring, nurturing, and community responsibility is the basic framework of loving thy neighbor, and doing unto others as you would have them do unto to you (Maxwell, 2007).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community teams (PLCs) regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. The following questions guided this study:

**Central Question**

**Research question 1.** How do teachers involved in PLC teams describe their
understanding of the relationships between the team environment and sharing, transferring, and discussing learning at the secondary school level? The interaction of PLC teams and their community learning was the major investigation of this case study. Members of collaborative teams in a school or district that function as professional learning communities become students of best practice (Eaker & Keating, 2012). The question identifies the perspectives of the PLC team and their understanding of the process of transferring community knowledge and teacher learning into their individual classrooms.

**Guiding Questions**

**Research question 2.** What do team members identify as their motivation for working together in their PLC team? This was the basic understanding of why an isolated secondary school teacher would open his or her classroom to the scrutiny of professional peers. “The driving force and/or motivation to become more collaborative with other teachers must be driven by the data are us by connecting what we are doing with the names and faces of our kids” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p. 54). The team has to remain the focused on student learning and the improvement of student/teacher learning. We must celebrate at each stage in the journey - every time significant work is successfully completed (Eaker & Keating, 2012). The basis could be a genuine enjoyment of seeing students succeed and a pat on the back from the rest of the school. This question focuses on the drive of the team that may be detected in observations, focus group interviews, questionnaires, and individual interviews.

**Research question 3.** How does the design of team meetings contribute to sharing, transferring, and discussion of learning? The PLC team must establish norms or protocols, and this served as a collective commitment for each team to build shared knowledge regarding best practices and the transferring of shared best practices (DuFour et al., 2010). This research
question showed connections in my observations with the focus group questions. The connection and deeper understanding led to a deeper questioning after the completion of the PLCA-revised (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2010) questionnaire and the individual interviews. Wood (2007) described the use of basic norms reviewed at the beginning of each team meeting: (a) no side bars, (b) remember airtime, (c) be honest, (d) remember confidentiality, (e) keep focused on kids, (f) no hierarchy of expertise, and (g) be respectful.

Research question 4. How do participants describe their experiences of transferring their collective learning into their classrooms? This question highlighted the process of applying what the teacher has learned as the adult learner in the meeting and putting into practice in his or her classroom. Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory highlighted the process of this research question, as the teachers use observational learning to understand and use the new information that has been obtained. The line of communication between teachers, barring issues of trust, led to a more candid discussion of issues within their classrooms. The PLC team members should have open and honest dialogue about the expectations they bring to the process by asking each member to reflect upon and discuss his or her past experiences with group meetings (DuFour et al., 2010).

Research question 5. What role, if any, does coaching or mentoring of teachers play in the PLC team? This question addressed teachers helping other teachers, and used the idea of not one coach but many coaches on the team to work together to help each other. Hipp et al. (2008) suggested the process of meeting and observing one another to provide feedback on instructional practices, assist in student learning, and increase human capacity of teacher learning. “Together they shouldered responsibility to systematically inquire into present practices, consult outside expertise, reflect on what they had learned from experience, and engage in searching
conversations with one another” (Wood, 2007, p. 290).

**Research question 6.** What challenges or barriers, if any, do participants identify that may prevent the transfer of instructional strategies in PLCs? This question addressed how the PLC team dealt with conflict during the school year. This was established from the teachers’ perspectives that developed during the focus group interviews and was also an area I explored deeper during the individual interviews. PLC teams cannot become high performing unless they understand conflict and how they will deal with the situation (Graham & Ferriter, 2010).

**Research Plan**

The design for this study was a qualitative case study. The case study approach explored a bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reported a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007). The research design explored a single concept in the educational reform process of a PLC. This was a holistic case with the approach of how and why the school used PLC teams, and the data included analysis of focus group teams. This was an embedded single case study (Yin, 2012). In this bounded system, the PLC teams’ interaction was the issue or concern. This bounded system was defined as a setting or context or a circumstance in which an event occurs (Stake, 2005). The type of design for this case study was instrumental. Stake (1995) suggested instrumental case studies explain a form of case studies that give the researcher the ability to understand something other than just the individual teachers in the team; this process aided to the instrumental case study to help in the understanding about the effects of the PLC teams’ interaction and transferring of knowledge. Thus, the focus was to the case itself: evaluating the program of professional learning communities.

This instrumental case study explored the perspective of teachers in PLC teams. The
research was developed around the theoretical framework of Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive learning theory and Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory. The use of these theorists guided the research design to a better understanding of the development of human learning patterns. This led directly to the selection of a rural setting in East Tennessee and the process of data collection from the PLC teams. With approval from the IRB, I began the data collection phase. Data were collected via documents, archival data, direct observations, focus group interviews, on-line questionnaires, and individual interviews. The analysis of data used holistic approach, which analyzed the entire case (Yin, 2009). The data collected led my research to a detailed description of the case as it emerged. Stake (2010) described the holistic approach as giving attention to the whole, more than one or more parts. In this process, reoccurring words or themes were highlighted with different color highlighters. The colors used were orange for most frequent, blue for moderate frequency, and green for low frequency. The coded themes were compiled in the case study report (see Appendix A). Stake (2010) highlighted that coded data analysis was detailed, rounded, and contextual; this was described as the researcher telling the story, highlighting only the information needed to explain the case study. I read all data collected several times to track and locate emerging themes within the research.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This study was delimitated by only using one school in East Tennessee. The setting was an area new to the PLC concept and the school system has yet to address any assessments of their PLC. The study was also delimitated to observation of only PLC teams and not vertical or horizontal teams within the school. The sample size was delimitated to four teams comprised of up to 30 total individual participants. Gallimore and Ermeling (2010) described teams as being placed in job-alike groups of three to seven teachers who taught the same grade level, course,
and subject. The leadership teams at the secondary school adjust the number of team members. They group by subject area and areas of need. In this qualitative case study, the teams had a maximum of 10 members and a minimum of three members.

One potential limitation of the case study was the location in a rural school in East Tennessee. An additional limitation was found in using only one high school and, within that one high school, only using four PLC teams. The high school curriculum coordinator selected the teams from Grizzly County High School. The research could be limited by the number of years the school implemented the PLC. The process was an evolving one, and the inexperience of the teams was not in my control. The study did involve grade levels below ninth grade. The reason for this distinction was the abundance of research addressing PLCs in the lower grades. This study addressed PLC teams at the secondary school level.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

An analysis of the current literature on professional learning communities was examined in this chapter. An overwhelming amount of research has been conducted on professional learning communities; however, few published studies have looked at the impact of PLCs on teacher practice or student learning (Vesico et al., 2008). Much of the research available was limited to quantitative studies comprised of test scores and surveys (PLC, 2011). Further research on the collaborative team process and instructional departments was needed to add depth to the work of a PLC team or school (Wallace, 2011). The theoretical framework of this study followed the theories of Albert Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive learning theory and Jack Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. The secondary theoretical framework followed the theories of Shirley Hord’s (2009) five dimensions of PLCs, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many's (2010) Learning by Doing dealing with PLCs, and Jane Bumpers Huffman and Kristine Kiefer Hipp’s (2003) modifications of the five dimensions of PLCs. This chapter also highlighted early theorists in the realm of schools as learning organizations by Peter Senge (2000), and the process of leading change by Michael Fullan (2011). The PLC culture, implementation, and sustainability follow the writings of Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (2008). This chapter will include an analysis of the basic history of the PLC movement, the dimensions of PLCs, and the major components of a PLC. This chapter will also give a comprehensive review of the themes of the PLC team and their ability to collectively transfer instructional strategies to one another. This chapter also contains a synthesis of the literature for teacher development, practices, basic collaboration, collective efficacy, leadership capacity, professional development or professional learning, best practices,
and the sharing of best practices. The conclusion of this chapter includes a discussion of the current gap in the literature of best practices within a PLC team at the secondary school level.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study incorporates a variety of frameworks. First, I integrated Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory. In the 1960s, Bandura demonstrated that people could learn by observing the actions and consequences of others. This theory also emphasized modeling and vicarious reinforcement (Woolfolk, 2008). Bandura later introduced cognitive factors such as expectations and beliefs in addition to social influences of models (Woolfolk, 2008). This perspective is called social cognitive theory.

The teacher on a PLC team will approach learning from another teacher as an adult learner, which means as a motivated adult educator who takes responsibility for their decisions (Culatta, 2012). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) defined this as andragogy, a learning strategy that focuses on adult learners. This was important to understanding how the team members approach learning and how it related to PLC teams. Culatta (2012) highlighted Knowles’ (1980) theory of andragogy with four assumptions about the design of adult learning: (a) adults need to know why they need to learn something, (b) adults need to learn experientially, (c) adults approach learning as problem-solving, and (d) adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value. Hord (2009) identified professional development designs that attend to both student and teacher learning, and often referred to the teacher becoming an active learner where the learners share ownership. The intent was to have teachers model the behaviors of other teachers and also model acceptable behaviors for their students. The idea of best practices and sharing of best practices is the basis of social cognitive theory. Internal and external factors play an important part of learning. The environment, personal factors, and behaviors are all key
components of learning from team member to team member. If a PLC team is modeling ineffective methods of teaching and there is no feedback from the administrator, the process will falter and eventually fade away (Fullan, 2001). The idea highlighted by Bandura (1977) was that teachers learn by observing each other and by teaching. Bandura (1977) suggested that information about the nature of things is frequently extracted from vicarious experiences and by enactive experiences.

The collaboration of teachers was only successful when the product being transferred was of high quality or was collected by inquiry. This was also the case when information was too complex or difficult, and there may be a restriction on how much one person can know about a certain situation or certain experience (Bandura, 1977). Rogers (2003) described the process as the diffusion of innovations theory. There are four main elements of the theory: (a) the innovation, (b) communication channels, (c) time, and (d) the social system (see Figure 2.1).

![Figure 2.1 Rogers’ five attributes of innovation.](image)

The five attributes of innovation in Figure 2.1 are (a) relative advantage, (b) compatibility, (c) complexity, (d) trialability, and (e) observability. Complexity was the one
attribute that deals with an innovation being too difficult to use and understand (Rogers, 2003). Teachers need to feel they understand the process and see meaning in the process. Just as Rogers (2003) suggested, if a task or innovation was too difficult, there was a good chance it would not survive. The sharing, transferring, and discussion of knowledge is valuable, but only if the correct information is shared. In the secondary school experience, the complexity of an innovation establishes the isolation and the feeling of not understanding the experience; this then revolves back to the comfort level of each teacher and the practice of maintaining the status quo. This was labeled as the privatization of the teaching experience. The idea is to share and to become a trusting member of the school’s re-cultured environment. The PLC team, in this sense, would become a learning, sharing, and collaborative team. As a result, the team ends up sharing ideas and learning from one another to better investigate the current issues facing their team and their school.

The second major theory was Jack Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory. Mezirow (2000) proposed that the adult learner uses a frame of reference that encompasses cognitive, conative, and emotional components, and was composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view. The modern teacher is aligned as a follower of the educational expertise of a program or intervention. The concept of being an autonomous learner who is free to make decisions is very difficult to understand. Lysaker and Furusness (2011) asserted that “Teachers need the kind of education that will, in fact, prepare them to critique trends which call into question the legitimacy of their knowledge and experience in the critical conversations about school improvement” (p.184). Mezirow (1991) suggested that transformations come to the adult learner one of four ways, which enables the adult to make sense of the new concept or idea being placed upon them. The four ways in which transformations can come to the adult learner are by
(a) elaborating existing frames of reference, (b) learning new frames of reference, (c) transforming points of view, and (d) transforming habits of the mind (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory

The adult learner engages one of the four ways of experiencing a transformation (elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, or transforming habits of the mind) by use of their habits of mind and point of view. According to Mezirow (2000), “The habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes” (p.6). The codes are often established by experiences or influences from authority figures from one’s childhood. Mezirow (2000) gives examples of possible codes:

- Cultural,
- social,
- educational,
• economic,
• political, and
• psychological.

Habits of mind may also be articulated in a specific point of view, which is (a) constellation of belief, (b) value judgment, (c) attitude, and (d) feeling that shapes a particular interpretation (Mezirow, 2000).

The PLC team must understand the process of adult learning and the preconceived notions each member brings to the group. The adult learning process explains how a teacher can mature and, subsequently, how a PLC team can mature as well. The team adapts and evolves over time to make the best decisions for the students in their classrooms. The PLC team members bring existing knowledge and experiences to the team, and they bring with them the codes of experiences that may help or hinder the adult learning process within the team. Rogers (2003) described adult learners as learners who want to discover things for themselves. The PLC teacher must bring this collective nature of discovery to his or her team, and a willingness to accept new experiences. The PLC team must always strive for highly effective avenues to build upon teacher learning and student learning.

Both Bandura’s social cognitive theory and Mezirow’s transformative learning theory gave rise to the fact that professional educators must feel good about their own abilities to achieve in the group setting and achieve in the class setting. Fullan (2001) suggests that in order to be most effective in influencing culture and performance, a person must have personal competence and social competence. The PLC team members must have self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. When combining all factors involving Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, the
adult learner must be willing to resist temptation to fall back to a level of comfort and retrain their cognitive thinking process to become a working member of a learning community. The PLC district, school, and the leaders must also be willing and able to meet the proper needs of all of its members.

Related Literature

The purpose of this section is to introduce relevant literature pertaining to the characteristics of all aspects of this instrumental case study. This section includes a review of the introductory masters of organization learning, schools as learning organizations, history of professional learning communities, dimensions of PLCs, components of PLCs, the culture of PLCs, collaboration, best practices and sharing of best practices, professional development, and leadership roles in PLCs.

Schools That Learn

In the book titled *Schools That Learn* by Senge, McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2012), school districts across America continue to struggle with ways to initiate, implement, and sustain learning organizations. The introduction of the general knowledge that schools can learn and become a learning community of sharing knowledge and communicating with all members sets forth the basic direction of professional development and total school reform. Senge et al. (2012) highlighted the impact of students in middle schools, and more recently high schools, as they are brought into policy and curriculum committees to take on shared responsibilities for the direction of the school. In this scenario, the school leadership embraces the community to have a voice, which was the lead-up to full-form PLCs. In this model of a school’s learning, the entire process of thinking must change to make total reform. Successful schools that focus on student learning accept the challenge of problems and problem
solving because they use a team concept. A school that is collaboratively working together understands that change is a constant component of public education in this sense of programs and initiatives. In the process of changing how one views problems, it is not resolved by one or two individuals but by the team or committee. Senge et al. (2012) outlined the five disciplines of learning organizations and learning communities (see Figure 2.3): (a) Personal Mastery, (b) Shared Vision, (c) Mental Models, (d) Team Learning, (e) Systems Thinking. The five disciplines are not “reforms” or “programs”, but they are “ongoing bodies of study and practice that people adopt as individuals and groups” (Senge et al., 2012).

Figure 2.3 Senge’s (2012) Five Disciplines of Learning Organizations

The basic concepts behind the five disciplines of learning organizations are the backbone of today’s PLC teams. They are defined as an intentional group formed for the purpose of allowing administrators, teachers, and others to participate in shared decision-making on a full range of issues that bear on the school’s institutional vitality (O’Malley & Baker, 2006). The school that becomes an organization of learning is ready for the next phase of understanding the process of shared ideas and collective inquiry to solve the challenges within the school.
Change Forces

Fullan (1998) stated that the vast majority of change efforts are misconceived because schools fail to understand and harness the combined forces of moral purpose and skilled change agent. Fullan (2011) also advised school leaders that the single greatest difference between effective and ineffective schools or organizations is the collective depth of understanding among employees about their work. The process of change on any level is difficult for educators to understand. Teachers, students, parents, and leaders will accept change if they experience effectiveness or the actual experience of being more effective (Fullan, 2011). The growth of any organization is dependent upon the quality of the employees. The changes addressed in PLCs ask for continued and sustained learning by the teachers and the school; however, current professional development distracts from the original purpose of helping the organization become a learning organization (Fullan, 2007).

Senge (2012) defined a learning organization as people continually expanding their capacities to create the results they truly desire and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. This means the learning organization becomes a professional organization or learning school. The school participates in shared governance, school-wide instructional focus, and action research (Fullan, 1998). In this definition, the learning organization is evolving into a learning community that leads to the development of teams. This process also guides the school towards major school reform and a major re-culturing. Thus, this is the next step in the formation of PLC teams. In many areas of education, when someone describes a part of the school as an organization, the basic assumption is a close knit group of people all going the same direction. This was defined as a learning organization and its environment. “Learning organizations neither ignore nor attempt to dominate their environments; they learn to live with
them interactively” (Fullan, 1998, p. 84). This was one of the early steps to forming a group of people to meet a common goal in the world of education. The school must become a part of its environment and not stand on the side waiting to dive into the action. Principals, teachers, and community members must be committed to the whole process and cast aside the view from the top (Fullan, 1998). As stated earlier, a school, its leaders, and its stakeholders must learn from their experiences. The process of transformation and understanding transformation must trickle down to all aspects of the learning organization. The PLC is only as good as the people working together.

After the mindset of accepting change within the organization is implemented, the aspect of teacher learning must also be identified and implemented. Fullan (2007) stated that the future improvement of the public education profession must depend on teacher and student learning, and he noted five key ideas to change the concept of what teacher learning should entail:

- Teachers for teachers must drive professional development,
- learning to do what is right where you work,
- student learning depends on every teacher learning all the time,
- deprivatizing teaching as teachers work together to continuously improve instruction, and
- teachers’ working conditions are antagonistic to the four previous points.

The concept of change is a major hazard to the basic understanding of how public education operates. The education profession is comfortable with the status quo and staying in the same sense of ease of doing tasks as people have always completed them. Any change requires tremendous sophistication as well as some risk-taking by teachers and leaders (Fullan, 2007).
History of PLCs

During the history of PLCs, the reform movement generated some formal debate in the early 1960s. Rosenholtz (1989) conducted a study of elementary schools and concluded that schools where learning cultures were established all shared a collective commitment to student learning in a collaborative setting. Teacher collaboration situated around common goals focused on student learning, which led to improved avenues for teacher learning (Rosenholtz, 1989). The research highlighted the problem of teacher isolation and the privatization of teaching. Little and McLaughlin (1993) concluded that the most effective schools operated as strong professional communities characterized by seven core principles:

- Shared norms and beliefs,
- collegial relations,
- collaborative cultures,
- reflective practice,
- ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice,
- professional growth, and
- mutual support and mutual obligation.

The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). This established one of the basic ideas or starting points for the term professional learning communities. Newman and Wehlage (1995) reported in their research of over 1200 schools that the most effective schools used restructuring tools to help them function as professional learning communities. The schools operated with three common ideas (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995):
• Engaged in a collective effort to achieve a clear, commonly shaped purpose for student learning,
• created a collaborative culture to achieve the purpose, and
• took collective rather than individual responsibility for the learning of all students.

The groundwork for the next phase of PLC research was beginning to be established and the common characteristics shared by effective schools were now aligning with the characteristics of modern PLCs. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) reported PLC schools shared common characteristics:

• Reflective dialogue,
• deprivatization of practice,
• collective focus on student learning,
• collaboration, and
• shared norms and values.

“Professional community with schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960s. Perhaps it is time it became a major rallying cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper” (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995, p. 6). Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) reported that when schools function as PLCs, their teams highlight student achievement by

• collectively pursuing shared mission, vision, values, and goals,
• working interdependently in collaborative teams focused on learning,
• engaging in ongoing collective inquiry into best practice and the current reality of student achievement and the prevailing practices at the school,
• demonstrating an action orientation and experimentation,
participating in systematic processes to promote continuous improvement, and
 maintaining an unrelenting focus on results.

From the beginning of organization of school learning to the full impact of PLC schools, the overall presence is some form of committees or teams. From this point forward, the development of collaborative teams will become a part of every aspect of PLC growth and sustainability; these are the fundamental building blocks of PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 2008).

Fullan (2001) reports that interest in PLCs has moved beyond the “whisper” of researchers to a growing “rallying cry” among practitioners themselves; however, the term has traveled faster than the concept (p. 63). Feger et al. (2008) suggested further literature review and research on PLCs, particularly about how PLCs should be assessed and evaluated in terms of their function and outcomes. Vesico et al. (2008) also suggested in-depth case studies of changes in teaching practice and student achievement for sample teachers working in PLCs.

**PLC Dimensions**

DuFour and Eaker (2008) defined a “PLC as educators committed to working collaboratively on ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 469). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) suggested that PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. This brings to the forefront the basic dimensions of a professional learning community. DuFour et al. (2010) highlighted three big ideas of a PLC:

1. Focus on learning: Working collaboratively to answer the difficult questions;
2. Build a collaborative culture: Schools improve when teachers are given the time and support to work together to clarify essential student learning, develop common
assessments for learning, analyze evidence of student learning, and use that evidence to learn from one another;

3. Focus on results: PLCs measure their effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. All programs, policies, and practices are continually assessed based on their impact on student learning.

The process of working collaboratively is highlighted by addressing four critical questions, which drives the clarity of understanding for the school to determine the direction they must take to succeed in the PLC journey. DuFour et al. (2010) listed these four critical questions:

1. What do we want students to learn? What should each student know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course?

2. How will we know if they have learned? Are we monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis?

3. What will we do if they do not learn? What systematic process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty?

4. What will we do if they already know it?

The basic establishment of a PLC works with the undivided efforts of the district leaders, school leaders, and the teachers. The three big ideas and the four critical questions steer the PLC in the direction of six essential characteristics. These six essential characteristics are very similar to other authors and originators of PLCs. In an investigation of a PLC school or school system, the basic essential characteristics should be in place. Some authors highlight five components and combine areas together. This is highlighted in the next section of this chapter. DuFour et al. (2010) listed the six essential characteristics of a PLC as follows:

1. Shared mission, vision, values, and goals,
2. collaborative teams focused on learning,
3. collective inquiry,
4. action orientation and experimentation,
5. commitment to continuous improvement, and
6. results orientation.

These characteristics drive every aspect of the PLC journey. This creates ownership for all stakeholders in the process. The district, school, and teams must address all dimensions and develop the rallying cry of “WE.” The motto of *we as a team* can do more than an individual teacher (DuFour et al., 2010).

**PLC Components**

Shirley Hord’s (1997) five dimensions or components of professional learning communities became the five basic areas of PLCs. The important areas for this case study are the three areas of collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practices (Hord, 1997). The dimensions were revised and updated in 2003 to identify and better understand the relationship of support and student learning. Huffman and Hipp (2003) revised Hord’s original five dimensions to

- shared and supportive leadership,
- shared values and vision,
- collective learning and application,
- shared personal practices, and
- supportive conditions: relationships and structures.

The last three components of the five dimensions highlight relationships and teaching practices. Huffman and Hipp (2003) restated the five dimensions highlighted by Hord (1997); they inserted
supportive conditions with relationships and structure. In PLCs, daily interactions move beyond caring relationships to higher levels of trust, respect, and recognition (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. 64).

**PLC Culture and Re-culture**

The culture change to become a fully functioning PLC is a very difficult task. Reimer (2010) suggested that leadership has been identified in studies as a critical element of change that leads to improvement, yet research does not define daily principal practices that are successful in developing a school-wide professional learning community. The problem was the lack of research of the inner workings of PLC teams. There are many areas within the PLC team that are not addressed or identified. More research is needed to better understand the inner workings of the team process. The role of the team and the inner workings of the team is the most important phase of the process. The culture shift comes from teachers having input in curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions (Reimer, 2010). The principal of the school must model and support these areas of decision making. Carroll and Doerr (2010) lay the foundation to the idea in which highly effective learning teams are supported by school leaders who build a climate of openness and trust that empowers team members to make decisions on how to improve teaching effectiveness that are directly linked to student needs.

School culture and the general perception of the school from the stakeholder’s viewpoint are critical to understand in changing the school’s culture. “While it is true that educators shape their school cultures, it is probably more accurate to say that their school cultures shape them” (DuFour & Eaker, 2008, p. 90). The school shapes how people feel about the leadership, students, and stakeholders. If people feel trust and a unified vision toward student success, then the school will make small steps towards success. The idea of a school’s culture can be summed
up in the view from the stance of a visitor in the building. What would a visitor see in a typical high school? *Teaching Today* (2006) highlights the following areas to investigate in the typical high school:

- Does the school reveal teachers teaching and students engaged in learning?
- What evidence of learning exists in the building displays?
- Is there equal representation of academic, athletic, and artistic excellence?
- Do students and adults walk through the building with a sense of purpose?
- Are students and adults in designated areas at designated times?
- Does someone greet visitors and register their presence in the building?

All of the areas listed above suggest that the high school is on one single mission towards learning. Huffman and Hipp (2003) stated that “The re-culturing of a school is completed by developing shared values, shared norms, and shared attitudes that affect the core of the culture of schools, which drives structural change” (p.15).

**Components of Shared Practices and Collaboration**

The conscious and unconscious transferring of community learning when trust is the social lubricant of a PLC team, as well as supportive conditions lead to the exchange of ideas (Hord & Sommers, 2008). This phase of practices in the classroom and the sharing of ideas are built upon the notion of trust and understanding. This enables team members to have shared and appropriately differentiated responsibilities (Fulton & Britton, 2011). The PLC team establishes a protocol and basic parameters of how the team will show mutual accountability for student achievement, and they are related to content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and teaching experience (Fulton & Britton, 2011).

DuFour and Eaker (2008) defined “collaboration as a systematic process in which people
work together, interdependently, to analyze and affect professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results” (p. 464). In the classroom, teachers must be in charge of the inner workings. They must plan, execute, and revisit what is happening on a minute-by-minute basis, or at the very least at the end of each day. Collaboration requires a substantial amount of time, professional effort, and interpersonal negotiation (Tiegerman-Farber & Radziewicz, 1998). The lack of control is a fear for many teachers, as well as an openness of trust. No single individual, professional, or parent can problem solve the complex issues in the educating of a student (Tiegerman-Farber & Radziewicz, 1998).

Eaker and Keating (2012) stated that collaborative teams are the heart and soul of a district seeking to improve student achievement. When collaboration or sharing of best practices is successfully discussed, the process of using collaborative teams must be at the fundamental foundation of the school's professional learning community. The process of collaboration must be instilled in each principal so they understand and incorporate collaborative teams in their schools (Eaker & Keating, 2012). In a PLC team, the work of the team is established by team norms and all aspects of teaching are established by the team, such as common formative assessments, common units, common pacing guides, and team determined level of proficiency (Eaker & Keating, 2012). During the process of collaboration with a PLC team, habits of inquiry require “internalizing the skills of collaborative analysis, thereby ensuring that the end result of group exploration is truly superior to what any member might have produced by relying on his or her own devices “ (Sagor, 2010, p. 49). If a single teacher can produce better results than the team, then this could lead to a critical hurdle for school reform. The individual teacher will need the help and support of the team during some form of planning, teaching, or re-teaching moment during the academic school year. The challenge to PLC teams is to ensure ways to help each
other and build a support network. This leads to a collaborative process of learning from others and sharing good and bad areas of a lesson. PLC Washington is a free website established by the Washington Education Association and Educational Service District 113 to provide easy and quick access to the PLC process. The online learning site establishes a learning community statewide. The collaboration process is electronic and offers practical solutions to everyday issues. One of the most informative aspects is the challenge cycle. The cycle was one of the driving forces for collaboration toward student learning. PLC Washington (2011) highlights the process of collaboration through this cycle:

1. Challenge
2. Initial thoughts
3. Interactions
4. Revised thoughts
5. Group work
6. Move forward

**Best Practices and Sharing of Best Practices**

The idea of sharing knowledge or acquiring knowledge from other professionals is a valid notion. In many ways, sharing of best practices or identifying best practices is simply on-the-job training with other professionals sharing their knowledge, experiences, ideas, and procedures (Casey, 2011). Eaker and Keating (2012) define best practices as a professional’s responsibility to constantly seek new knowledge regarding the latest and most effective practices, and then to incorporate the behaviors into his or her daily practice. Constantly seeking and practicing best practice is an essential characteristic of a professional learning community (Eaker & Keating, 2012). Traditionally, teachers collaborate very little; they manage their own
resources and enjoy great discretion in their pedagogical practices (Schlager & Fusco, 2003).

The idea of sharing of ideas and helping one another is not a new concept. The idea of defining and implementing this process is difficult. In the search for a clear-cut definition of best practice, the basic logical sense of the term is that it can mean many different things for different professions. In the world of public education, the best definition comes from the notion of collective inquiry. This was best defined as “reflective dialogue and collective inquiry into curriculum, common formative assessments, instruction, and needed job-embedded professional development on lesson study and effective instructional strategies, and challenging and questioning each other’s practice in spirited but optimistic inquiry” (Reichstetter, 2006).

**Understanding PLC Teams**

When all teachers in a school learn together, all students in the school benefit (Hirsh, 2009). The concept of PLC teams was an important process of this case study. The understanding of teams and their ability to transfer knowledge was an area of inquiry and the soft area of the research literature. “Most teachers don’t want to work in isolation; they want to be a part of something bigger. They realize that collaboration was good not just for the children, but for the teachers as well” (Honawar, 2008, p. 26). The concept of teamwork and team-oriented teaching was used over and over throughout many educational reform movements. The process of forming teams and the actual use of teams was a difficult demonstration of school reculturing. Nelson, LeBard, and Waters (2010) suggested three major aspects to making the work of PLC teams productive, effective, and professionally stimulating:

- Use of a collaborative inquiry cycle to guide the work,
- learn how to have deep conversations, and
- take an improving approach to looking a student work.
The inquiry cycle (see Figure 2.4) is a process of investigating a problem of practice or a teaching challenge that needs attention and improvement (Nelson, LeBard, & Waters, 2010). This is highlighted in the diagram below:

![Inquiry Cycle Diagram](image)

*Figure 2.4 Nelson, LeBard, & Waters' the Inquiry Cycle*

This cycle is a good description of what needs to happen within the PLC team. In the review of Nelson, LeBard, and Waters’ (2010) journal article, the highlighted procedure is currently being used in an elementary school. This identified another area of need to address a gap in the literature. The design of the PLC teams in secondary schools should reveal the inquiry process of teacher and student learning and the PLC team process of transferring learning to their classrooms. From the synthesis of the literature, the inquiry process and having a set of procedures is vital for success of the overall process of a PLC.

The effective aspect of making teamwork was highlighted in the past paragraph within the inquiry cycle; however, following guidelines and protocols sets up the team function and success. Jolly (2008) suggests that teams will have a variety of shapes and structures, but they
tend to share common characteristics:

- Teams serve as vehicles for teacher professional development and ongoing learning focused on instruction.
- Team goals are determined by student data and needs.
- Teams meet regularly throughout the school year and use a systematized approach to guide their work.
- Team activities revolve around an action-inquiry cycle that engages teachers in questioning, studying, planning, experimenting, reflecting, and assessing.
- Team members rotate roles and share responsibilities equally.
- Teams keep documentation of their work and share this publicly.

The guidelines and protocols will be different in each team. The set-up and structure of a team will also grow and regenerate as the team members become more comfortable with each other and become bigger risk takers (Carroll & Doerr, 2010). Vesico et al. (2008) suggested the key to understanding a teaching team was the de-privatizing practice in which teaching was made public and the focus was on collaboration. Eaker and Keating (2012) stated that PLC teams must simply agree upon parameters within which the team will conduct its work; these parameters are identified as the team norms.

The PLC collaborative team is one that engages in a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and impact their professional practices in order to improve individual and collective results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). The teams are established at the building level with a simple team structure such as teachers who teach the same course or grade level (DuFour et al., 2010). Teams could also be comprised of teachers who teach a related arts subject or special instructional class. Those teachers might work in the collaborative process by
working together or joining a team that might best fit their job description. Jehlen (2011) introduced an art teacher in Minnesota, who used alternative funding measures established by the Minnesota Department of Education to fund a small group of teachers to work together to evaluate and upgrade their work with students. The teachers established a PLC team where teachers videotaped their lessons; they each reviewed each other’s tapes and provided feedback and collective inquiry (Jehlen, 2011). The issue of the PLC team was self-established; however, the protocol or norms of the team set a baseline for improvement in instructional delivery. The district administrators in this school system did not set up the PLC, they self-established the movement.

Graham and Ferriter (2010) suggested several important key factors of PLC teams, and that building a trusting relationship is vital to the success of school re-culturing. PLC teams usually go through four common stages over time marked by specific issues, challenges, and behaviors (Allenman, 2004). The four stages are the (a) forming stage, (b) storming stage, (c) norming stage, and (d) performing stage (see Figure 2.5) (Allenman, 2004).

![Figure 2.5 Allenman’s (2004) Four Stages of Teams](image)

The team concept or collaborative team concept is a growing development of adult
learning, shattering of old boundaries, and an open line of communication. The motivation and success of the team will greatly impact the success of transfer to the classroom. The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning (DuFour et al., 2010). The ultimate goal is to improve teaching and to improve the successful attempts to educate all students in the school.

**Professional Development**

DuFour and Eaker (2008) stated “a professional is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base” (p.469). Cambridge dictionary (2011) defines *development* as when someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced. The professional educator uses this process as a chance to grow and become more advanced. The term “professional development” means “comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (Learning Forward, 2012). In an ideal world this is a very simple concept; however, educators bring with them baggage and past experiences that hinder this process.

Heitin (2011) stated that Robert Marzano claimed that teachers are made, not born. The ability to develop a staff is the primary job of the building principal. The process of PLCs highlights and allows teachers and leaders to focus on areas of need collectively brought to the forefront to address student achievement. John Goodlad addressed the process of staff development (as cited in DuFour & Eaker, 2008) as ongoing, embedded in the process of developing and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Teachers in a PLC team must sustain and have continued collective inquiry, or they should help establish what is to be learned or where to help seek knowledge. This opens the door for open communication within
professional development that is most needed for the school or a particular team.

A team will not always agree or establish a clear understanding of what is needed for growth. In the professional development process of PLC teams, conflicts without personal attacks can be a positive setting for the team (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). Within the basic understanding of professional development and the individuals involved with the process, it is good to disagree and have a non-attacking spirited debate. The only winners and losers in this process will be the students and their learning. One of the most effective ways to address the issue of continued learning is to engage teachers in meaningful staff development activities (Marzano 2003).

Desimone (2011) identified five characteristics of effective professional development (see Figure 2.6): (a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation.

![Figure 2.6 Desimone’s (2011) Five Characteristics of Effective Professional Development](image)

The basic concept of professional development could be shifted to the term professional learning.
The process is geared up to another level of professional interactions, including the practice of sending teachers to conferences in teams of two or more to foster conversations about purposeful applications (Fogarty & Pete, 2010). The adult learner wants to be active and engaged; the interactive learning is the hallmark of effective, applicable, and transferrable professional development (Fogarty & Pete, 2010). The underlying goal of professional learning is student driven, and the data will set the compass on the direction educators must go to achieve the desired results.

The professional development highlighted from this research could be the stepping-stone for future team development. Vesico et al. (2008) expressed that others should conduct studies that document changes in teaching practices as teachers work in PLCs. These studies, both quantitative and qualitative, should be used to train, teach, and help grow other professionals in the field of education. In the realm of PLCs, ongoing work must be highlighted and developed to help others grow and give a set of protocols to help teachers fully understand the need for professional development.

**Leadership Roles in a PLC**

The PLC process is only as good as the people who are committed to the process (Eaker & Keating, 2012). There are three areas of leadership within a school district that help with the PLC journey. Eaker and Keating (2012) define these three areas of leadership and their roles as (a.) district leadership, (b.) school leadership, and (c.) teacher leadership (see Figure 2.7): (Varney, 2008) (Varney, 2008)
Figure 2.7 Eaker and Keating (2012) Three Areas of School Leadership

These three areas of leadership must work together to become a true learning organization. It is the responsibility of the district leaders to provide the support for the schools. It is the responsibility of the principal to provide the support for the teachers and school. It is the responsibility of the teachers to provide support for each other. This is the team concept of all participants focused on the same purpose and meaning.

Huffman and Hipp (2003) state that the principal is held accountable from the district office for implementing and sustaining PLCs; however, his or her main purpose is to provide supportive conditions and to foster the engagement of members of the school community in decision making. The real idealistic leader is one who is transformational, which means he or she is a facilitator, where the influence and power is manifested through other people instead of over other people (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Varney (2008) explains that PLC leadership is defined as Loose-Tight Leadership, which is built around the idea of freedom and responsibility with the framework of a highly developed system. Varney (2008) also explains that a PLC

<table>
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<th>District Leadership</th>
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<td>Must have deep understanding of all PLC concepts and practices</td>
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<th>School Leadership</th>
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<td>Only person in the position to bring all the disparate elements of effective schooling together</td>
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<th>Teacher Leadership</th>
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<td>Teaching is the means to an end</td>
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...
leader must

- motivate and inspire staff to believe it can be done,
- have strong opinions about what must happen,
- clearly communicate the “musts,” and
- be “loose” around how the “musts” are accomplished (p.1).

The leader of a PLC school must be 100% committed to making effective PLCs a top priority and realize PLCs are not an add-on to an already full plate (Venables, 2011). With this in mind, commitment is vital, but success is built by the job a principal does at selling this product to the faculty. Alvy and Robbins (2010) quote Casey Stengel, a famous baseball manager: “Getting good players is easy. Getting ‘em to play together is the hard part” (p.46). This is vital in getting good teachers to communicate together to make the school a better learning environment.

**Summary**

The reflection of the PLC literature and the foundation of PLCs was a key component of my research. The theoretical framework and the foundation of the PLC must be in place prior to the formation of the team and, therefore, the understanding of the team concept. To trust, commit, and understand a PLC team, one must understand how people learn new ideas, use collective inquiry, and adapt to others’ ideas. The understanding of how a team works is what drove this research. The understanding of what drives this success is the one-team, one-goal mission of better student achievement. The team within a school and the process of meeting is spotlighted in this case study. The school culture was directly tied to the process of inquiry of knowledge and helping all students succeed. The theoretical frameworks of Bandura (1977) and Mezirow (1991) gave rise to the understanding of how adults and students learn. This then trickled through the school and down to the teams. The literature contains ideas from the
original PLC frameworks. The writings of Senge (2012), Fullan (2001), Hord (2009), Eaker (2011), and DuFour (2008) all build upon each other and create a foundation of learning. The future developments and adaptations made from Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman (2010) to assess the PLC led to the original investigation of this case study. The development and glimpse into the world of PLC teams and their interactions is a driving force for my research. The gap, or missing piece, was the prolonged study of a rural high school in East Tennessee, and their ideas of sharing and presenting best practices.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community teams regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. This was the use of successful best practices or best instructional practices in the classroom and their ability to transfer collective inquiries to their classrooms at a secondary school in East Tennessee. This study was an in-depth view into the PLC teams and their ability to transfer knowledge from the adult learner to the student learner. This was also defined as collective inquiry of teachers working in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement (DuFour, 2004).

The theoretical framework identified with this case study was Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive learning with a strong emphasis on enactive learning and vicarious learning. Jack Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory was used to help explain the procedures of adult learning within the context of intergroup and outer group contact. The key terms collective inquiry and transferring knowledge will be woven into the fabric of the two theories to help better understand rural professional learning community teams.

Design

The research design for this study was qualitative. The reason for choosing a qualitative approach was so that I could get close to the participants and experiences of the PLCs. The process of understanding the experiences of team members within the PLC team and interpreting their daily accomplishments was an essential component of this research. This is an instrumental case study design, with research studying one bounded system inside a single East Tennessee high school. An instrumental case study is executed to provide a general understanding of a
phenomenon using a particular case (Harling, 2002).

The particular phenomenon or study focus was on the PLC teams within Grizzly County High School. This school system and high school was located in a rural area of East Tennessee. One of the special characteristics highlighted of qualitative design is that it is situational. “The process was holistic more than elementalistic, not reductively analytic, and it seldom emphasizes direct comparisons” (Stake, 2010). “Holistic inquiry involves collection of in-depth and detailed data that are rich in content and involve multiple sources of information including direct observation, participant observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents, reports, and physical artifacts” (Harling, 2002).

The true highlight of this form of case study research was the fact that all phases of the PLC process have appropriate parts of the overall school reform process. Case study research was not limited to a single source of data. Good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). This approach was fitting due to the characteristics of the instrumental case study, which uses multiple forms of data collection, including observations, interviews, documents, reports, and audio-visual materials.

The analysis of the data was holistic in nature with a clear understanding of the entire case. This was defined as giving attention to the whole rather than to one or more parts (Stake, 2010). The entire case study was defined as the understanding of teacher perspectives of PLC teams as it relates to best practices. This was the whole case in this particular instrumental case study. Stake (2010) described the holistic process as detailed, rounded, and contextual; the author only tells the detailed parts of the story needed for the audience to understand the process. The understanding of the PLC teams was a whole approach of how they interact and share knowledge. It is not embedded, even though the teams are within the PLC of the school; the
holistic approach of each team is the case study.

The philosophical assumption of this case study was epistemological. I attempted to move closer to the participants during my research. Creswell (2007) identified this assumption as the attempt to lessen the distance between the participants and the researcher. I spent time collaborating with the PLC teams in the field and became an insider. This was also developed in the worldview or paradigm of a constructivist. In this type of study, the researcher addresses the process of interaction among individuals and “the context in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2007). This instrumental case study evolved from the naïve collaborative approach to a well-developed collective inquiry of PLC teams.

Another perspective within the case study research was the use of Yin’s (2012) social-interaction theory. “The research producers and users belong to overlapping professional networks with ongoing communications” (Yin, 2011). This was used in my research to help expose me to the world of the participants, and they were exposed to my world. This was also a basis for the concept of PLC team interaction. Participants may alter the focus of their studies or instruction based on dialogues with other team members (Yin, 2012). Understanding the world of the participants and allowing the participants into my world of understanding was vital to the success of this instrumental case study. I attempted to give a narration of the story of four PLC teams at Grizzly County High School.

**Research Questions**

Research Question 1: How do teachers involved in PLC teams describe their understanding of the relationships between the team environment and sharing, transferring, and discussing learning at the secondary school level?
Research Question 2: What do team members identify as their motivation of working together in their PLC team?

Research Question 3: How does the design of team meetings contribute to sharing, transferring, and discussion of learning?

Research Question 4: How do participants describe their experiences of transferring collective learning into their classrooms?

Research Question 5: What role, if any, does coaching or mentoring of teachers play in the PLC team?

Research Question 6: What challenges or barriers, if any, do participants identify that may prevent the transfer of instructional strategies in PLCs?

Participants

The participants for this case study were selected from one school system in the East Tennessee. The secondary school and the professional learning community teams were selected during ongoing discussions with the Secondary School Curriculum Coordinator. The Secondary School Curriculum Coordinator was guiding the particular PLC teams that were most beneficial for this instrumental case study. He suggested in personal interviews the four groups that should be selected. The groups had shown an ability to work within the idea of PLCs and were presumed to be able to give a diverse reflection and review of the overall process. The sample size was selected by means of purposeful selection of the PLC teams. According to Creswell (2007), “Selecting a case requires that the researcher establish a rationale for his or her purposeful sampling strategy for selecting the case and for gathering information about the case” (p. 102). “This was defined as sample elements judged typical, or representative, or chosen from the population” (Donald, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). The teams were comprised of
seven to 10 members. An effective team must have a minimum of three members and a maximum of seven members with an instructional and achievement focus, plus common teaching responsibilities that will aid the collaborative process (Gallimore & Ermeling, 2010).

Each of the teams was observed, and this made up the four focus groups. The selection of individual interviews was guided by number of years of service in the field of education, role in the PLC team, observations of the teams during meetings, analysis of results of focus group interviews, and analysis of the online questionnaire. The ability to choose elements of a representative sample of the school PLC team was vital to gathering information to establish the boundaries and context of the case study. The individual interviews participants were concluded upon saturation of the data. Saturation is defined as finding as many incidents, events, or activities as possible to provide support for each theme or context of the case (Creswell, 2007). The process of individual interviews continued until repetition of themes or phrases occurred within the data collection and analysis stages. The rationale for this sampling procedure was to fully understand how the PLC team works. The team members gave their perceptions of how they work within the team and how other members work within the team. This also gave a positive and negative response of the team as it related to other teams.

Site

Grizzly County Schools (pseudonym) is located in between Middle Tennessee and East Tennessee. The region of the state is called the Upper Cumberland Region. The student demographics are 83.4% White, 11.4% Latino, 4.3% African American, 0.5% Asian/Pacific, and 0.3% Native American/Alaskan (Education, 2010). The school system has struggled to meet federal benchmarks in graduation rate, math, and English. The high school implemented the professional learning community in the fall of 2009. The Secondary School Curriculum
Coordinator initiated the PLC model for the entire school system. This high school was the first school to fully implement the school reform initiative. The main purpose of implementing the PLCs was to address the individual need of all students and teachers in their rural community.

The site was selected for the ability to research a school in a rural section of Tennessee, and the process of studying a PLC in the first phases of implementation. The school has approximately 15 teams within its PLC system. The school has one principal and three assistant principals. The school also has four guidance counselors and 150 staff members. The school has a full curriculum that meets and exceeds the basic requirements for the Tennessee Department of Education.

**The Researcher’s Role**

I am a coordinator for school partnerships with rural districts in Tennessee. I am a former high school principal in Southeast Tennessee. I am entering my 19th year in education, and my second year as a coordinator for school partnerships. I am pursuing this form of qualitative research as a human instrument. I wanted to understand the professional learning community team. Through the years of my tenure as principal, I have experienced the many theories or fads of school reform. The one school reform, which has remained constant, is PLCs. This is considered a bias and assumption from personal experience; however, a true community for learning where all stakeholders believe all students can learn has its grassroots in biblical based teaching. Believing the best in people usually brings the best out of people, which is based in biblical examples of Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:36-39; Timothy 4:11) (Maxwell, 2004). I wanted to collaborate with participants in the rural East Tennessee high school. I was not a participant in the study; however, I observed all four of the PLC teams as a data collection tool. I conducted focus group interviews and individual interviews. The overall process was
also supported by an online questionnaire. I embraced the role of a human instrument as a data collector and an analysis of data.

Several assumptions and biases are presented in this case study including the basic understanding or misunderstanding of what is a professional learning community. With several years of experience in education, I brought to the study my personal assumptions and biases. The difficult task was to review the school reform process from of a novice teacher. Another view I brought to the basic understanding of educational teams within a single school setting, and working within a rural secondary school. Many schools adopt the structure of leadership teams that help guide the school. Marzano (2003) suggested that a leadership team operates best by ensuring that the views and concerns of all members of the school faculty are represented in its deliberations. This was a concept familiar to my years in education, so I came into this study with this particular bias. The PLC team was working for all students, particularly the students in their classrooms. The concept that all community members will each have a voice and be intricate members of their team is not an assumption that is easy to put forward in public education.

**Data Collection**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the data collection procedures for the case study, and no data were collected until the official IRB approval was validated (see Appendix B). Grizzly County Schools gave permission and allowed the use of facilities, participants, and data. All participants signed a consent agreement to interview and record all conversations (see Appendix C). All concepts, ideas, or expectations were organized in a case study report used in the Data Analysis section of Chapter Three. Several data collection tools were used to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers in a professional
learning community team. Grizzly County Schools provided consent to access the three PLC teams at Grizzly County High School. The following tools were introduced and are explained in this section: documents, archival data records, direct observations, focus group interviews, Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) open-ended questionnaire, and individual interviews.

Documents

I collected documentation from the school system containing information regarding the implementation of the professional learning community. This included information regarding PLC meetings. The reviewed data also included agendas, minutes, meeting timetable and frequency, administrative documents, newspaper articles from the area discussing PLCs in the school, and the scripted hard copy of the introductory PowerPoint presentation to the stakeholders in the spring of 2009. The analysis reviews all information important to PLC team meetings and the transferring of instructional strategies between teachers. This included operating procedures and protocols that were documented for guidance of the PLC team. This helped address the three research questions dealing with transferring best practices, sharing best practices, and challenges through the process.

Archival Data

I collected archival data from the school system that included data before and after the implementation of the PLC. This included all documents, letters, and school policies on the PLC. The school provided all forms of research Grizzly County Schools used to make their decision to convert Grizzly County High School to a PLC school. The information aided in the formation of points in the case study research to establish themes. This information was used in the process of establishing a research connection with teacher perspectives of their PLC team.
Direct Observations

I made several field visits to the school site to observe the four teams meeting in their PLC groups. I introduced myself with each team and attempted to be unobtrusive in the meeting and recorded all information observed using the observation protocol (see Appendix D) and an audio recording device. I used a research assistant to help with the transcription to add to dependability. The process of proving dependability or reliability was expected to produce variability because of the context of the studies. The researcher looked for consistency as the extent to which variation can be tracked or explained (Donald, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006).

The observation procedure led to producing the variations of the three groups. This led to the composing of the narrative that presents the evidence, and my presentation that represents a neutral and factual approach and the view of the focus group teams (Yin, 2012). This allows for the process of an outside researcher to reproduce the same information from the PLC team. In this process, the case study could be reproduced in the essence of repeating several observations of the same PLC teams, and will hopefully lead to the study being replicated, giving credibility to the case study. This was a glimpse into the inner workings of the collective inquiry between professional educators.

The research assistant and I used a transcription form to record every minute of the observational procedures for the three groups. The direct observation led to the focus group interviews on the same day of the PLC team meeting. The PLC teams meet every Thursday. I observed four different teams on four different Thursdays. I observed the teams a total of four times each. The observation of the teams on four separate occasions gave a better understanding of each team. I also used three different times of the semester to see the team deal with different
team discussions.

**Focus Group Interviews**

At the conclusion of the regularly scheduled PLC team meeting, I conducted a focus group interview with the PLC teams. This was completed on the same day. The interview questions were prepared from the literature review and were further developed during the study as new evidence appeared from data collection (see Appendix E). I interviewed each focus group and use an audio recording device. I then transcribed the interview session the next evening with the help of my research assistant. I destroyed all audio recordings at the conclusion of my research. The interview questions were piloted at a local high school in my district. One area of interview questions was used in this section, as well as the individual interview portion, is the concept of collaboration in the PLC. This examined the purpose of shared personal practice or best practices for individual teachers. The interview process reported on the transfer of information concerning intra-group contact and outer-group contact. This meant the sharing of ideas with group members and to non-group members. The complete list of questions was adapted and evolved, as information became available. They were inspired by research from Huffman and Hipp (2003) from their text *Re-culturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities*.

**Surveys/Questionnaires**

The online questionnaire used was a published questionnaire constructed and tested for validity and reliability by Dr. Dianne F. Olivier, Dr. Kristine Kiefer Hipp, and Dr. Jane Bumpers Huffman. I obtained permission to use the questionnaire (see Appendix F) for this research. The questionnaire was titled the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R). The questionnaire assessed the perceptions of the teachers relating to share and supportive
leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning or inquiry and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions of their PLC (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2010). The PLCA-R were recently reviewed for internal consistency, and were confirmed following Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients for factored subscales (n=1209): Shared and Supported Leadership (.94); Shared Values and Vision (.92); Collective Learning (.91); Shared Personal Practice (.87); Supportive Conditions (.82); and one-factor solution (.97) (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2010). Cronbach Alpha coefficient is defined as a measure of the internal consistency of a test containing items that are not scored dichotomously, based on the extent to which test-takers who answer a given test item one-way respond to other items in a similar way (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This aided in the understanding of the case study. The questionnaire also guided later individual interview questions. The concept of leadership in a PLC was addressed in the use of the questionnaire, and highlighted from the Chapter Two review of literature. I used an on-line questionnaire completed by each PLC team member in each focus group. The participants were emailed a link and pass code to complete the survey online. The email also had an attachment from Grizzly County Schools giving authorization for school employees to participate in the questionnaire. The participants who completed the PLCA-R survey online and on time will received a $20.00 lunch gift card to Subway restaurant. The online survey was available for two weeks after the completed focus group interview process. The online survey link closed after two weeks.

**Individual Interviews**

For the final stage of the data collection, I interviewed selected participants from the four focus groups that were purposely chosen from Grizzly County High School PLC teams (see Appendix G). The selection of the participants was dependent on focus group interview answers
from individual team members, years of service in the field of education, role in their PLC team, observations of teams, and analysis of PLCA-R questionnaire. The individual interview participants chosen for this phase of the case study data collection gave more depth to the idea of PLC teams and their ability to share information. The participants chosen gave a unique insight and understanding of the collaborative process. The essence was to capture the PLC team at the high school level, and the attempt was to find the teachers who had the greatest understanding of the process. The selection process was not limited to the above listed criteria; this led to a greater diversity among the interviewees. This only aided in the better understanding of the PLC team environment. The individual interview questions evolved from data collected and the further development of the focus group interview questions. The interview questions were open-ended, focused, and structured; this allowed the key respondents to comment on certain events (Tellis, 1997). All interview questions were piloted at a local high school in my school district.

The individual interviews took place on the phone and by email. The interviewees were selected in groups of three if possible, and this procedure was repeated until saturation of data was achieved. They were interviewed one-on-one. The selection of the groups was by convenience and ease of meeting times. There were 30 participants in this case study. The interviewees were not in the same room during the interview process. An audio recorder recorded the individual interviews. The transcription began the next evening by an expert research assistant. This portion of the data collection was predicated upon new themes created from the previous data collection methods stated in the earlier sections of Chapter Three.

Individuals who were selected to participate in the individual interview phase of data collection were provided lunch and a $25.00 gift card to Wal-Mart. They were entered into a drawing for a $100.00 gift card at the completion of all data collection procedures. This process led to a
greater willingness to participate in the research.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis of this case study followed a holistic approach. According to Stake (2010), “Qualitative research was holistic research, detailed, rounded, and contextual. We would like to tell the whole story, but we cannot tell what exceeds page limits and audience patience” (p. 174). The data were collected for the case study to give a detailed description of the case as it emerged. The documents, archival data, observations, focus interviews, questionnaire, and individual interviews outline the collective inquiry of the professional educators and their ability to transfer knowledge from team to team and classroom to classroom. The collected data were coded to identify the emerging themes and contexts of the case study. The themes began with 26 overall themes highlighted from the case study report and was eventually narrowed to the most commonly used themes which shaped the case study. The coding derived from a detailed description of the case that emerged in which I detailed such aspects as the history of the case, the chronology of events, or a day to day rendering of the activities of the case (Stake, 1995).

In the early stages of the data collection and analysis, I organized a case study report. This was adapted from a case study report designed by Stake (1995) in the chapter titled “Writing the Report.” The organization of my case study report includes a Microsoft Word self-created template in which I typed my findings in the appropriate areas of the case study report that included areas of what I expected to be in the report (Stake, 1995). This guided the data analysis section and helped with the shaping of Chapter Four by sharing the results from the study, and Chapter Five of my analysis of the findings in this instrumental case study. Typing the information completed the form and saved all-important information in a password protected computer file. The data were collected, coded, and organized with the use of detailed
descriptions and the case study report. I used a repetition of categorical data chosen from the report and coding of themes. In this process, the themes or repetition of themes were highlighted and analyzed. This portion of the analysis is identified as the analysis of themes. Yin (2012) states that a researcher makes assumptions about the case, and these motives drive the research questions for the case. If so, then the techniques for analyzing the data are steered toward the answering of the research questions and the preconceived assumptions prior to and after the collection of data phase (Yin, 2012).

After reading all transcripts and notes several times, the next phase of the analysis was to chart the repetition of themes and look for common themes that emerged within all forms of data collection tools. This ranged from hard copy documents to individual interviews. The process consisted of color-coding themes or words to check for repetition of reoccurring ideas from the data collection process. The final section of this portion of data analysis was an understanding of assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case (Creswell, 2007). The preliminary case report with seven blocks of expected ideas was used to finalize meaning of the case. The final blocks of idea, which became my emerging themes, were narrowed down to the final four research themes. The final data analysis is the interpretive phase. I then reported the meaning of the case in Chapters Five. This addressed and transferred what meaning came from learning about the issue of teachers’ perspectives of best practices and the understanding of sharing best practices within a PLC team.

**Trustworthiness**

The following methods were used to increase the trustworthiness of this study: credibility, dependability, and transferability. Yin (2009) suggests a case study must also identify four key tests to establish the quality of any empirical social research; these include
construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (see Figure 3.1). The four key points were woven into the framework of this instrument case study. They are highlighted in this section with the understanding of data collection, data analysis, research design, and composition (Yin, 2009).

![Diagram of the four key points in case study research]

**Figure 3.1** Yin’s (2009) Four Tests for Effective Case Study Research

**Credibility**

I used member checks as ongoing consultations with participants and my expert external auditor. The external auditor is the third committee member of the dissertation team. He was an outside committee member who works in a neighboring school district. He did not work in the Grizzly County Schools. This was important for the review and response to ensure reliability of the data collected from the participants. The use of four separate focus groups created a triangulation of the data. In addition, the use of documents, observations, interviews, and an online questionnaire served as a triangulation method. This was defined as robust evidence that
has been established from three independent sources, and the three sources coincide (Yin, 2009). The information gathered from four different PLC teams was the source of this triangulation. The final process gave credibility to the study was to have prolonged interaction in the field with all participants.

**Dependability**

I used an audit trail where all procedures, data collection, and data analysis methods were documented in a notebook. The audit trail was the researchers’ documentation of how a study was conducted; including what was done, when, and why (Donald et al., 2006). This allows an independent auditor to review all phases of the case study to check for reliability. The independent auditor for this case study was an education professor at a local public university. I also used a journal notebook and kept all notes, questions, and correspondence with participants and the expert auditor.

**Transferability**

The study used thorough descriptions of the data and analysis of the data. This allows all research results to be transferred to other school districts through the replication of the study and through using various aspects of my data collection tools. The total replication of the study is not needed to allow for transferring of knowledge from professionals to professionals. Any aspect of this case study could be used to examine or assess a school district’s PLC.

Through a process of continuing to perceive and reflect upon acts of research, we come to know their meaning in our experience and their relationship to ourselves and we relate the process to our own individual studies during this dissertation journey. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52)
Ethical Considerations

The study of teacher perspectives of PLC teams is the essential element for this case study. The ethical considerations in this study were the use of pseudonyms for all participants and the high school. I used a pseudonym for the name of the school system. As a part of this ethical consideration and protection, I did not use the grade level or subject area of the PLC teams. The data collected was locked in a file cabinet in my office and the computer files were password protected. All sensitivity issues that arose during the study were kept in private and no one reviewed the information unless they were participants and/or expert auditor. I signed consent forms along with all participants to assure confidentiality of the information. I used a digital recorder and destroyed all recordings at the conclusion of my research.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

As highlighted in Chapter Three, the data collection included archival documents, observations, focus group interviews, an online assessment, and individual interview questions. The data findings are set forward in the numerical order of the six research questions investigated during the holistic case study. The manner of data collection and analysis was presented as themes, which were developed during the analysis of the final emerging themes. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community teams regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. This was the use of successful best practices or best instructional practices in the classroom and their ability to transfer collective inquiries to their classrooms at a secondary school in East Tennessee.

This qualitative case study investigated six key focus research questions to gain an in-depth view into the world of secondary school PLC teams. I used the research questions and a literature review to guide the development of the focus group interview questions. The individual interview questions developed from the emerging themes categorized from the focus group interview questions, observations, archival documents, and the online questionnaire.

The teams were selected for the case study with approval from the Director of Schools and the principal of Grizzly County High School. I studied four teams in the high school, with a total of 30 participants. The data collection began with the initial stages of reviewing archival data, direct observations, focus group interviews, an open-ended online questionnaire, and individual interview questions. A total of seven teachers interviewed in the final individual interview process. I labeled the teams as Team A, Team B, Team C, and Team D.
Participant Background

The Professional Learning Communities at School Level

The PLC implementation was initiated in the summer of 2009, and all schools fully implemented PLCs. Basic implementation training began for the administration and key school leadership stakeholders. A brief history of the Grizzly County Schools Professional Learning Community was derived from the archival data in the form of PowerPoint, implementation documents, PLC protocol, and direct correspondence with the Instructional Supervisor.

The building-level leadership (BLL) consisted of the executive principal and the three assistant principals. The BLL then established the main protocols for the school. The PLC teams formed to work as grade level teams in the main core subjects of math, English, social studies, and science. The BLL established other subject areas as teams, but the main focus was on the core subjects, which were in the accountability model established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The state of Tennessee fully updated new state standards in the fall of 2009, and the school system decided to change the collaborative process while this shift was taking place. The school, under the leadership at the time of implementation, rolled out the PLC process as a way to work together and discuss data and establish team goals.

During the first year of implementation, the school PLC teams set aside time to use common pacing guides and common benchmark assessments. The teams would then submit their benchmark assessment levels to the central office. The assessment scores were given in the percentage of students who were considered proficient and advanced. The overall process was not fully engaged by the entire faculty at Grizzly County High School. As much as 40% of the school stakeholders did fully engage in the work of the PLC implementation as stated by Secondary School Curriculum Director (2012).
Building-Level Leadership

The school changed administration two different times during the PLC implementation process. The current BLL was entering their second year together and established a refocus of the PLC concepts and commitments during the winter semester, beginning January 9, 2013. The Leadership team, consisting of eight members, established a new focus and rationale for helping their PLC teams. The team highlighted several key areas of concern with the PLC process:

• Set PLC times as time untouched on the Executive Principal’s calendar to allow for attendance.
• Set Sacred Times for office time void of interruptions.
• Set Sacred Times for evaluations/walk through/general classroom visits.
• Set a minimum of 2 meetings per month with Central Office PLC Management to discuss concerns/issues/plans.
• Executive Principal will rewrite Assistant Principal and support staff duties and responsibilities using effective and equitable delegation of duties to allow for the focus on instruction and learning with PLCs.

The leadership of the school also participated in a revival meeting with Dr. Bob Eaker at the central office to prepare for the upcoming refocus. The term revival meeting refers to the process of re-energizing the leadership and stakeholders around the principals of a true PLC. I was able to attend the meeting with the leadership participants and work alongside of the team. This meeting set up the refocus phase. I withheld all observations, until the refocus was established in January 2013.

Building-Level Leadership Team (BLLT)

The principal of the school was hired in the summer of 2011 with the sole purpose of
revitalizing the PLC process at the high school. The PLC implementation had not been an overwhelming success at the high school, and the other schools in the system had seen greater success since 2009. Upon his arrival, the principal inherited some school accountability issues, and with the overall change of leadership, this led to a somewhat unforeseen one-year adjustment period in the building and a year of waiting to fully understand the PLC process of the school, which led to the refocus and retooling of the BLLT. The refocus and retooling of the BLLT was a change of team members and an overall change of focus. The team established several areas of immediate attention, which were put into place on January 2, 2013. The BLLT worked through this planning process during the fall semester of 2012. I first came into contact with the team mid-semester of the fall of 2012 at the PLC revival meeting with Dr. Bob Eaker, co-author of *Learning by Doing* and *Every School, Every Team, and Every Classroom*.

The principal introduced the purpose of the team and this new concept of communicating within PLC teams to the faculty in December 2012, and the plan of action initiated in January. The BLLT released the following areas as needing immediate improvement:

- Development of mission, vision, and goal statements.
- Development of programming to promote high levels of learning.
- Develop direction for Algebra I/II and English I/II/III improvement with emphasis on gap closure.
- Review and develop the school’s ACT policy.
- Review and develop the school’s current PLC policy.

The BLLT spent the entire winter and spring semester retooling their entire school. The retooling of the entire school was the changing of team members and a change of focus of the PLC process. The evaluation of their PLC teams through this case study was a welcome addition
to this process.

**Content Area PLCs**

The content areas of Grizzly County High School, since the original inception of the PLC, established grade level teams of English I, II, III, and IV; Algebra I and II; Biology I; Physical Science; and U.S. History. These courses were the original courses tested by the state of Tennessee under NCLB (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012). Wardlee (2013) explained the new alignment of the PLCs within the school during our initial conversations. The PLCs operated in subject area teams and focused on student learning. All subject areas were situated in this manner. All PLCs were driven based on data results in order to pursue high levels for all students. The main areas of focus during the research formed around the core subject areas and the tested subject areas. One area of concern expressed by the BLLT was that they simply wanted to know how the school was progressing towards educating all students every day of school.

At the beginning, the Tennessee Department of Education and the local school district initiated many changes, which delayed much of the data collection phase. As stated earlier, the awarding of the Race to the Top (RTTT) grant by the U.S. Department of Education led to major shifts in the teacher evaluation model, implementation of Common Core State Standard (CCSS), and online testing of the CCSS through the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The PLC process, relative to content areas, highlighted eight areas of focus for the new formation of the PLC teams:

- End of Course (EOC) tested subjects would meet a minimum of twice per month.
- A minimum of one meeting per month would take place in the executive principal’s office.
• All non-tested subjects would meet a minimum of one time per month.
• All PLC groups/teams would revisit and revise norms for the group and submit them to the executive principal.
• An agenda would be provided to the executive principal and all PLC members prior to the meeting.
• All EOC tested subjects would bring a minimum of one data example that consisted of student data used to drive instruction.
• All PLC groups would submit 45-day plans.
• All PLC groups would provide copies of common assessments copies to the executive principal a minimum of one time per month.

The information listed above was given to me during a called meeting with the principal and the PLC team I was visiting. I received this information on January 9, 2013. During the visit, I noticed the immediate change in the style of meeting and the norm changes. One major shift that greatly guided my work was a complete and finalized schedule of meeting days and times. I will give more details of the meeting when I discuss focus group meetings and in the analysis of the data in Chapter Five.

**Data Collection**

**Data Collection Schedule**

The beginning stages of data collection started with the development of a working schedule for collecting the team PLC data. The executive principal helped guide this development. He also aided in the set up and scheduling of team meetings and their protocols. Alphabetic letters A-D identified the teams, and each member was given a number as they submitted answers to emailed questions and/or order of correspondences.
Observation Schedules

The observations schedule helped establish a baseline of communication with the PLC teams. This allowed a window into the world of each team and their interaction dynamics. I used the observation protocol document to guide my introduction to each team (see Appendix D). I was a non-participant and non-obtrusive observer. An audio recording device recorded all verbal communications in the meetings. I then transcribed the dialogue and summarized with my notes. I used a research assistant to help with the process of taking notes and updating all-important facts of the observations. Several groups provided agendas for use during our times on campus. I observed each group at least two times and repeated with teams as themes emerged. The PLC teams were labeled as follows: Team A, Team B, Team C, and Team D. Each team was from a particular content area and was hand selected by choice from the Central Office and the principal. The content areas were the same with the addition of special education teachers as well. Three of the teams were listed as EOC tested subjects and the other team was the senior level team, which is non-tested.

The observation schedule spanned from October 2012 to March 2013. During this time, focus group interviews began at the end of one of the team’s regularly scheduled meeting. I visited teams during their regularly scheduled meetings. The principal emailed all participants that I visited during October through March. This decision helped ensure that no team would plan for my visit. The pop-in visit was the expected and accepted norm for the data collection phase. The team’s observation schedule consisted on the following observation pattern (Table 4.1):
Table 4.1

*Team Observation Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Team A</th>
<th>Team B</th>
<th>Team C</th>
<th>Team D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>10/13/2012</td>
<td>10/13/2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>11/15/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11/20/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>1/9/2013</td>
<td>1/23/2013</td>
<td>1/24/2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>1/16/2013</td>
<td>1/31/2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evident in Table 4.1, Teams A and B emerged as the most frequently visited teams. Teams C and D were very similar, and I engaged the teams regularly earlier in the process. However, I did draw from all of the teams for individual interviews to help gain perspective from every team involved in this case study. In March, I briefly visited with all teams shortly to finalize any details as the online questionnaire and individual interview sections of the research began. I also visited with the Building Level Leadership Team (BLLT) on this date to receive updates on the overall PLC revival process.

**Focus Group Interview Schedule**

The focus group interview questions followed one observation meeting during the past school year (see Table 4.2).
Table 4.2

Focus Group Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team A</th>
<th>Team B</th>
<th>Team C</th>
<th>Team D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email follow-up:</td>
<td>Email follow-up:</td>
<td>Email follow-up:</td>
<td>Email follow-up:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/20/2013</td>
<td>2/20/2013</td>
<td>10/29/2012</td>
<td>11/22/2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group interview session followed the regular observation meeting. I took notes on the questions and answers from each group. I also used the focus group interview questions from Appendix E to guide the discussion. I also allowed for follow up responses during my allotted time. My research assistant used the audio recording device to ensure all information was gathered during our time on campus. She also recorded by hand every answer by the group and the participant number by the arrangement of their seating in the room. I followed each focus group interview session with an emailed copy of the interview questions. We recorded, scripted, and documented all phases of the interview process. We implemented a routine interview-seating chart for this phase of the data collection (see Appendix G). I sat in the front of the six to seven members of the team. The research assistant recorded and sat in the rear of the group. This helped her not to be distracted by facial expressions or body language during her recording time. I would press forward on scaffolding questions, as I read body language and facial expressions.

I suggested during the interview that if any participant would like to add to the process that they respond to my follow-up email. Every team had at least one member who contacted me by email to supply information surrounding the interview questions and other pertinent
information regarding their team. They also shared other information, which added to the collection of data surrounding their team. This aided the theme development during the data collection process. The additional information also helped narrow my time to two particular teams. The analysis of the additional information will be highlighted in more detail later during this chapter and in Chapter Five.

**Online Questionnaire PLCA-R Schedule**

In January 2013, I ordered the online questionnaire titled Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2010). I emailed the login information link to all 30 participants. I received information from 20 participants during the month of February 2013. I opened the online window for recording their answers from February 1, 2013, at 8:00 a.m. (CST) until February 22, 2013, at 12:00 p.m. (CST). This allowed three full weeks to complete the questionnaire. I invited 30 participants or each member of the four teams. I received 20 questionnaires, which yielded a 67% response rate. I required each participant to email when they completed the questionnaire with their ID number so I could track which team responded. This provided the data from which to calculate which participants should be invited to participate in the individual interview phase. The six PLC dimensions used in the survey helped with the reduction of categories during the data analysis portion of this qualitative case study.

**Individual Interview Schedule**

The individual interview schedule established the means to gain more depth around the formation and workings of the PLC teams. I selected the participants by their actions during the observations of the team meetings, reactions, and responses during focus group interviews, follow-up email-added information, and responses on the online questionnaire. I purposely
selected the individual interviews to finalize the saturation of the data during the collection and
analysis phase of the research. The number of participants per team and the dates of the
interview are listed in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3

*Individual Interview Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant &amp; Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 TA1</td>
<td>4/17/2013</td>
<td>Team A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 TA2</td>
<td>4/17/2013</td>
<td>Team A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 TA3</td>
<td>4/17/2013</td>
<td>Team A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4 TB1</td>
<td>4/19/2013</td>
<td>Team B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5 TB2</td>
<td>4/19/2013</td>
<td>Team B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6 TC1</td>
<td>4/19/2013</td>
<td>Team C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7 TD1</td>
<td>4/19/2013</td>
<td>Team D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participant number was derived from the order of the invitation of the email, team,
and number from the team. For example, Participant 1 TA1 was first email invite and Team A1
was first person from Team A to interview. The interview process began by email and
completed on the phone and with emailed responses to follow-up questions. This was an initial
shift from the original plan of meeting with the participants one-on-one in a neutral location.
The participants simply did not have time during this month of the school year to drive and meet
at a location. For this reason, I decided it would be much more convenient for the participants if
I conducted phone interviews.
Data Analysis Results

In the analysis of the data, an instrumental case study guided the research review process to better understand the perspective of the teachers in PLC teams. The case study focused on one bounded system within Grizzly County Schools. This led to a holistic inquiry approach, which involved collection of in-depth and detailed data that was rich in content and involved multiple sources of information (Harling, 2002). The philosophical assumption of the bounded system case study was epistemological. Creswell (2007) identified this assumption as moving more toward the participants in the case study. I spent the majority of my time collaborating with participants in the field and by email. I also attended several Building Level Leadership Team (BLLT) meetings and professional development training for all principals within the school system. The completion of the data collection culminated with archival artifacts, observations, focus group interviews, an online questionnaire, and individual interviews.

For purposes of this case study, the first phase began with the initial categorized collected data, which developed emerging themes and contexts of the case. The early stages of the data collected and analyzed were organized in a case study report. The report was listed on a Microsoft Word self-created template that I used to collect findings from different areas of the data collection process. Through all interviews and observations, an audio device recorded all conversations. I then transcribed and file-protected the recording and printed the transcripts to use with the initial categorizing phase. The initial lists of coded phrases or themes were recorded on a large sheet of poster board to analyze how many times the themes emerged during collection of the data. I used different colored highlighters to mark phrases and to determine which ones became reoccurring phrases or themes. I used the color orange to identify the predominant phrases or themes. I accomplished this during and after reading the transcribed
conversations and field notes many times.

The next phase of the analysis was to chart the themes and look for common themes that emerged. The collection of the phrases or themes began with 23 reoccurring themes. I then folded themes and phrases, reduced the number to 13 themes, and eventually to six basic themes, which were the most prevalent throughout the data analysis process. The purpose of charting the responses was to see which themes could be folded into a larger or overarching theme.

The third and final area of data collection and theme identification came through the process of finalizing individual interviews to engage in a deeper understanding of the PLC team process and identify more depth towards the final six emerging themes. The final section of the preliminary case study report was written beneath the six idea blocks that finalized the true meaning of the case.

**Observational Data**

The first area of data collection was to collect and review all archival documents from the district’s implementation of the PLC process. I introduced myself to two key district personnel at professional development conferences provided by the state of Tennessee. The two individuals from Grizzly County Schools allowed access to archival data on the process of PLC introduction and implementation. I reviewed two introductory PowerPoint presentations used by the district to introduce the concept to their key leadership personnel and teachers. I also studied introductory paperwork and office communication surrounding their PLC plan of action. Basic themes began to develop from their pattern of implementation and information tracking since 2009.

As stated earlier, Grizzly County High School began the PLC process at the same time with every school in the district. Grizzly County High School began the process as an act of
compliance. The school evolved through many leadership changes and adjustments to the PLC process. The act of mandated motivation was the driving force throughout the process. This became highlighted as a task to be completed.

The initial phase of observations began with four teams. I established the process of how the research would be conducted during the school year. The observational investigation led to a more in-depth process of observing the participants and trying to become an insider in the PLC team process. This enabled my research to go forward, as I discussed ideas, concepts, and issues with the individuals who were working in the trenches of the PLC team process. During this phase I observed and recorded the following indicators of each team, compiled the reoccurring indicators, and listed them below:

1. Group members often nodded to show they agreed during observations.
2. If I saw grimaces on the faces of several members, I assumed they disagreed with the actions of the PLC team leader.
3. Most meeting attendance was below 100%.
4. Only one team covered norms.
5. Every team had some form of an agenda.
6. The average time of the meeting was 34.7 minutes.
   a. The longest was one hour. (First observed meeting)
   b. The shortest was 25 minutes. (One of the most productive)
7. Re-focusing strategy introduced by BLLT was highlighted within the teams.
8. All team members took notes.
9. The majority of team members made eye contact.
10. Each team had conversations around the data.
11. Data driven focus around common formative assessments.

12. The next meeting date and time was discussed.

13. Action steps that must be completed before the next meeting.

14. Discussion of common formative assessments and feeling a true energy in the room.

15. Test averages were used with teams, not raw data.

**Focus Group Interviews**

Throughout the process of the observational phase and entering into the phase of focus group interviews, themes emerged from observations and interviews. The themes revolved around the ideas and thoughts of the teachers on the four themes. The list aligned with the PLCA-R questionnaire without the participants completing any aspect of the survey. A relevant pattern towards the major six categories of the questionnaire quickly began to emerge. I will highlight the relationship with the survey later in this chapter. The following themes began to emerge:

1. Belief in team;
2. professionalism and conditions that surround professionalism;
3. straightforward meetings;
4. working together, trust, and caring relationships;
5. collaboration;
6. group discussions/we decided;
7. team procedures on how to interact;
8. essential learning;
9. needs of the students;
10. targeted areas of improvement;
11. six members are enough, if they are all active in the process;
12. no job embedded professional development within the meetings;
13. communication: text, email, hallway between classes, and Facebook;
14. motivator is mandated;
15. no discussion of the foundation of PLC;
16. accountability by common formative assessment data;
17. positive experience for the most part;
18. underutilize all aspects of the PLC process;
19. agendas in every meeting;
20. streamlining the process of PLCs;
21. shared objectives and common goals;
22. it may not be perfect, but this works for us;
23. work on our goals;
24. instructional decisions;
25. vertical alignment; and
26. PLC dedicated around professional development and current trends.

**PLCA-R Online Questionnaire and Individual Interviews**

The next step was to begin the process of reading and reviewing the transcriptions, notes, and answers from the focus group; interview questions guided the first direction of writing individual interview questions. The next course of action was to invite all participants to complete the online questionnaire. As stated earlier in the chapter, the online questionnaire ran for three weeks and concluded with notification of completion to finalize the official individual interview requests. The online questionnaire compiled each participant’s responses from 52
questions divided into six PLC dimensions. The mean score from 20 participants ranged from 0-4 (see Figure 4.1). The use of the mean scores from the questionnaire and the theme categories helped with the reduction of 26 themes to the final four categories.

![Figure 4.1 PLCA-R mean scores of six dimensions of a PLC.](image)

I continued to follow with open coding of major themes and phrases to track all of the responses. I compiled the themes and phrases, as they were reviewed in my research findings. The total major open themes reached 26, and I then began to categorize each theme or phrase into 10 basic categories. At the completion of the PLCA-R, I invited 10 members to take part in the individual interview phase. Seven participants from the original 10 invited responded to the email invitation. This gave a response rate of 70% for the individual interview phase of data collection. All four teams were represented for the individual interview phase of data collection. From the observations, focus group interviews, the questionnaire, and finally the individual interviews, I finalized the data by collecting it into a narrow list of themes to the following 10
categories:

1. Relationships,
2. values and vision,
3. collective learning,
4. structures,
5. leadership,
6. shared personal practice,
7. collaboration,
8. professionalism,
9. supportive conditions, and
10. guidance or direction.

Under each category, I compiled all of the 26 themes or phrases that were narrowed during data collection. The original list of 10 categories was adjusted during the last review of all responses charted from the individual interviews and final touch points with participants. I also selected three participants to review the finalized list to check for proper direction and assurance of common themes they witnessed during their time at the school (see Figure 4.2).
Figure 4.2 Ten categories from data analysis.

The responses from the questionnaire and individual interview answers ranged in different areas of the 26 themes; the categories enabled my approach to use a laser-like focus on the team concepts and perceptions. The questionnaire and individual interview responses completed repetition of themes and phrases that allowed a laser-like focus on the final categories to address the six research questions.

A research assistant, three selected participants, and I then scrutinized the 10 categories. This led to the final process of data analysis and four finalized categories emerging. I folded and blended the categories into four unifying themes that best represented the data collected from start to finish of this instrumental case study. The four categories aligned closely with the PLCA-R online questionnaire, with a 67% match of the six basic categories of the questionnaire. The research led to four finalized categories that were very similar to the six dimension areas of the online assessment. In Figure 4.3, the final four categories were compared to the six categories of the PLCA-R. The questionnaire was designed to understand the teachers’ perceptions of their overall PLC process and it was intriguing how closely aligned the two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values &amp; Vision</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Collective Learning</th>
<th>Structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Personal Practice</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive Conditions</td>
<td>Direction</td>
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</table>
became throughout my research. The key factor that led to this alignment was the saturation of
data towards the structure of the PLC team within Grizzly County High School that became
apparent during the final stages of data collection (see Figure 4.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Categories</th>
<th>PLCA-R Questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Relationships</td>
<td>• Shared &amp; Supportive Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Values &amp; Vision</td>
<td>• Shared Values &amp; Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collective Learning</td>
<td>• Collective Learning &amp; Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structures</td>
<td>• Shared Personal Practice</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.3 Comparisons of data categories and questionnaire.

Research Questions

The case study and data findings were identified and highlighted from within each of the
six research questions. The observations, focus group interviews, PLCA-R online questionnaire,
and individual interviews data were collected and analyzed to address each of the six research
questions using the following four categories: (a) Relationships, (b) Collective Learning, (c)
Values and Vision, and (d) Structures. This case study report directed the initial theme to open
the case report, which led to the finalized four categories. The categories surfaced as saturation
of the data occurred during the data collection phases of the research. Each research question
was identified and addressed from the viewpoint of the participants with the use of quotes and
responses from all data entry points.
Research Question 1

How do teachers involved in PLC teams describe their understanding of the relationships between the team environment and sharing, transferring, and discussing learning at the secondary school level?

The interaction of PLC teams and their learning community was the central theme of this instrumental case study. The questions, as stated in Chapter One, are as follows: What is the drive of the team? Why do they perform the way they do?

Relationships. The basis of the team environment is built around the relationships people build within school and with teammates. Do they invest in changing the culture of their school to be student-first thinkers? The participants from each team expressed this to be vital to the success of the team. “To exchange ideas and suggest ways to help each other is the drive and focus of the team” (Focus Team A1 Participant). “The process of improving the team with our collective work leads to shared objectives and common goals” (Focus Team A2 Participant). Focus Team A had an overwhelmingly positive experience working with each other. They felt they truly worked toward a goal of helping students in their content area.

On the other side of the experience, Focus Team B expressed frustrations around the team concept and their feelings of helping each other. “I have been part of an effective PLC group in which members collaborated together and supported one another; however, I have also been a part of a PLC group in which members were uncooperative and hostile” (Focus Team B Participant). Another member of the Focus Team B stated, “I am never consulted; I am made to feel like an ingénue and practically an idiot by two of the seven member PLC team, one of which is supposed to be our leader.” The range of emotions went from belief in the team to a non-trusting environment. There was a connection between teammates when all areas of the
framework were working correctly. The relationship portion of team success was one of the most difficult aspects to master. This was why being a high functioning team was such a great challenge.

The action of the relationships of adults and adult learning was very difficult and dynamic. The building of trust and culture in a team was very difficult to maintain and sustain. Achieving bottom line agreement was a true turning point; it was when team members became interdependent, and they knew who was doing what, when, and where (Sibbet, 2011). The relationships of team members was an ever growing phase of ups and downs that led to doubts and fears, which also led adults to fall back on their comfort levels, or what was a true basic instinct (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (2000) stated that relationships with others were greatly influenced by past experiences and hinged on our habits in dealing with these experiences.

Even one the most negative responses from Focus Team B pointed towards not losing their time to collaborate. “The data information is great, but the overall experience has not been as great as it could be” (Focus Team C Participant). Focus Team D Participant suggested the process of the PLC experience and relationships could change at any given moment, but it was “Informative, supportive, and encouraging as we speak today.”

**Values and Vision.** The direction of a team is vital to the success of any organization. “I feel we are just starting the journey and we are not where we need to be, but we are starting to share ideas and learn from one another” (Focus Team C Participant).

The way one looks at his or her situation is a key to success in life. “We believe in our team and stay focused on the essential elements of the course” (Focus Team A Participant). The focus and direction of the team, school, and school system must be all going the right direction to truly succeed in education. Parscale (2013) pointed out “If we do not know where we are going,
then we cannot take the next step, or determine if we have arrived”.

A Focus Team A Participant stated, “The value and vision of the school helps us stayed focused on the essential course elements and the targets of the team.” In many cases, teams continued working through the school year and experienced the highs and lows of team collaboration.

During individual interviews, five of the seven interviewees felt like the team aligned with the mission and vision of the school and the school system. Some team members did not know the mission and vision of the school. The direction and drive of the school can enable or disable the team to work towards the supreme purpose of helping all students.

Individual Interview Participant 4 said, “Yes we are aligned with the school mission and vision; we strive for all students to succeed.”

**Collective Learning.** The process of collective learning within a team was an area where I had to explain the term and describe why the process was labeled in this fashion. DuFour and Eaker (2008) stated that the process of collective inquiry results in the team members developing new skills and capacity, which will then heighten a new sense of awareness, and gradually shift attitudes, beliefs, and habits.

Consider one great statement from a team with newer members, “We do take liberties to share ideas and best practices whenever the opportunity arises” (Focus Team D Participant). This is a great example of the team growing in the area of learning together as the school year progressed. Sharing ideas and then transferring the new ideas to their classrooms is one of the key areas of every PLC.

Another team member stated, “The process is to share and implement ideas, proved through formative and summative assessments” (Focus Team D Participant 2). During the
collection of data, team members always referred back to the use of data. The central office made a determined point to focus on results of common formative assessments and benchmark assessments.

Focus Team A listed six responses during interviews to the question of how team members transfer learning into their classrooms:

1. We work together to help each other.
2. We work to create a common goal and then decide how to achieve this goal.
3. The key is “WE.”
4. Common assessments help the process of transferring the learning.
5. We plan together.
6. We discuss what is working and what is not working.

In team B, the process was defined as “members teaching how they want to.” Focus Team B Participant stated, “We don’t, plain and simple.” The purpose of sharing ideas and then using them in the classroom should be to use tried and tested methods to help all students learn.

Focus Team C Participant stated, “We feel like if we implement what we are discussing; then we can decide if it will work or not.”

**Structures.** During the evaluation of the online assessment, one area became clear; the time to meet and discuss ideas was sacred, so much so, that the BLLT addressed it in their memo to the entire faculty. Focus Team D Participant highlighted the process of their time: “Our PLC team is provided times to meet and with the freedom to meet on our own.” This participant also noted “The main structure comes from the agenda we are required to submit to the BLLT” (Focus Team D Participant 2). The main focus of the time and establishment of the PLC structure is on the main areas of data, students, and assessments.
Focus Team A Participant 1 highlighted that “Goals are the focus.” When I inquired for a more in-depth understanding, the participants mentioned goals focused around common formative assessments and improving student achievement. One participant stated that “We use common assessments; this means every test, quiz, and assignment is used to support our learning” (Focus Team C Participant). The term “structure” can imply support from the building level administration and from within their teams.

**Research Question 2**

What do team members identify as their motivation for working together in their PLC team? This area of the research completely focused on the process of how the team members determined their motivation to complete the process of their PLC. The motivation of school PLC teams must be shepherded through the process toward using data on a daily basis (Eaker & Keating, 2012). Varney (2008) suggested three areas of the modern leaders’ calls to motivate their staff:

1. Motivates towards the “why.”
2. Clearly communicate the “musts.”
3. Be “loose” around how the “musts” are going to be accomplished.

Eaker and Keating (2012) stated, “We must celebrate every single success along this journey” (p.34). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, (2010) highlighted the phrase “What gets monitored, gets done” (p.1370). Grizzly County Schools knew they had to focus on assessments and use of assessments to drive better instruction in every classroom; thus, they mandated with “non-negotiables,” which essentially means this is what we are as a school system and this is how we do it.

**Relationships.** The dynamics of the relationships between team members, other teams,
and the administration is ever changing. The viewpoint of all four teams regarding motivation in this instrumental case study came from the administration office, and BLLT were required to sustain the PLC process from the central office. Of the four teams, 100% felt the motivation was because “It was mandated!”

**Values and vision.** The alignment of Grizzly County High School and Grizzly County Schools was, “We are a PLC system with PLC schools” (Grizzly County High School Participant). Varney (2008) indicated that a leader has to motivate the direction but has to be loose on how the teams arrived at the end result. The freedom to accomplish the end result or the vision was the process of how the team worked to set goals and accomplish the goals. The restrictions were related to the question of how to monitor the PLC process during the journey. The central office had to address the direction or the shepherding of the process through “How do we know if we have been successful?”

**Collective learning.** Even with all teams expressing that motivation was mandated, Focus Team C Participant focused on the following, “It just makes sense to me to work together on something instead of by one teacher in isolation. We feel more can be covered and this benefits all students to have extra eyes on their work.” One way in which the PLC team thought that a team was helpful was that a team is far superior to isolation of single-minded teaching.

**Structures.** “It is mandated by our school system and we must do it, if we can help students then we must explore all options. We do not get a choice, but we see the value in the process” (Focus Team D Participant). The structure is established and predetermined for the teams at Grizzly County High School.

“‘The structure of the school system and school is situated to build upon the collective capacity of all teachers, to build upon a better understanding on how to help all students (Focus
Group B Participant 1).

“The mission and vision of the school system and school revolves around ‘Success for all students,’ the teachers see the value in helping one another” (Focus Group B Participant 2).

One final area of motivation for teachers and administrators in the state of Tennessee was the process of the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM). The principals and teachers evaluation system began in Tennessee during the fall of 2011. TEAM differentiated teachers into five effectiveness groups: Significantly Below Expectations (1) to Significantly Above Expectations (5). The rating was calculated based on 50% qualitative data and 50% quantitative data, offering a holistic picture of an educator’s practice (Tennessee Department of Education-TEAM-TN, 2013). This process is highlighted by TEAM Evaluation (2013) (see Figure 4.3). If the school improved through student achievement (assessments) and student growth (value added), then the teacher effectiveness rating improved. The motivation provided by the state to help all students was another mandated motivation, which the teacher can obtain help with the support from their teammates.
Research question 3: How does the design of team meetings contribute to sharing, transferring, and discussion of learning? The word design was defined as the creation of a plan or convention for the construction of an object or a system; this could be the environment in which something operates (Design, 2013). The design of the PLC teams should be centered on how the team members worked together within the team. This was accomplished by teams establishing the basis of their existence in the forms of the processes called Norms and Protocols. Ken Williams (2010), in his blog on the website All Things PLC stated, “It is easy for teams to create team norms, but the real work is in the keeping of the norms.”

Relationships. The relationship of team members and the BLLT was vital to the success of the PLC team. Establishing the team norms happened before my arrival at Grizzly County High School. The process of working together and sharing ideas was apparent in the interview phases and emailed responses about the subject of accountability. The norms and protocol with
regards to relationships surfaced in the phase of individual interviews. Three key areas surfaced around the process of sharing, transferring, and discussion of learning:

1. The limitation of not having a safeguard in place to redirect meetings towards the task at hand,
2. a true agenda to monitor the time and change discussion, and
3. one person performing the task of all of the discussion.

The relationship within the team or lack of a relationship led to an unproductive meeting. The design of the team or the environment did not lead to a better option. Mezirow (1991) stated adults would use past experiences to confront or deal with a situation in which they felt uncomfortable. The team members relied on their past experiences to manage the time until the meeting was over. This also fell under the category of mandated motivation.

**Values and vision.** The design of the team structure was established by the principal, which led to the formation of the team. The alignment of the PLC team needed to fit neatly into the bigger piece of the school PLC puzzle. The environment in which the PLC team operated was under the judgment of the BLLT; this highlighted the process of compliance versus commitment to the PLC process. To show compliance to the mandated PLC process of the school and school system, each team was required to turn in all data from common formative assessments and team agendas. The research question also asked: How does the team check for actual sharing? The school leadership tracked this process by way of agendas and proficiency rates of students during common formative assessments and benchmark assessments (Principal, Grizzly County High School). This aligned with the complete protocol of the school. Focus Team D Participant stated, “We use the agenda and do not carry forward on other than this area of accountability.”
**Collective Learning.** How do teachers and principals know if this learning and these procedures are taking place within their PLC teams? The discussion around the centerpiece of the puzzle was difficult to understand for many participants within this case study. The collective learning of the team was tied directly to the accountability of the team. If team members were learning the right information from one another then, in theory, their ability to instruct should have increased. One participant stated that “The principal always tries to set up a system of meetings with PLC groups and hold them accountable, but the school is so big that these systems happen in theory but rarely in practice” (Focus Team B Participant).

“The team has a secretary who takes notes at every meeting and a record of all assessments in a folder. This folder must be turned in at the end of the school year” (Focus Team C Participant). The key to sharing, transferring, and discussing learning within the team was to show progress.

Focus Team A Participant highlighted, “Our focus was on writing scores and increasing all students, we set our goal and we produced.” What is the final measure of how the school knows if it was successful in helping students increase their test scores? At the end of every school year in Tennessee, each school receives the test scores of the summative assessments.

**Structures.** The simple process of monitoring and reviewing information about the team was the form or structure of the PLC process by the leadership of the building. I inquired about how team members were evaluated to see if PLC teams added value. Many members did not know how this process worked. When questioning became more detailed in the individual interviews, the participants stated the purpose of the team and the simple structure. Individual Interview Participant 5 stated: “We do not use norms enough, we simply do not revisit the process of how we should interact within the team.”
Individual Interview Participant 6 stated, “We turn in copies of agendas and notes from each PLC meeting, and those are put into a notebook.” Of the seven individual interviews, all seven highlighted the agendas, but only two highlighted the lack of norms. PLC teams need a system in place to hold each other accountable if one person on the team does not “play nice” or is steering the meeting in the wrong direction (PLC, 2011).

**Research Question 4**

How do participants describe their experiences of transferring collective learning into their classrooms? Bandura (1977) suggested, through social learning theory, that the teacher use observational skills to understand new information and process/synthesize his or her appropriate response. The ability to develop a trusting and caring relationship could accelerate or hinder the process of collective learning. If teachers worked in a trusting environment, then they may feel more open and honest about their true feelings. During my research the opposite was true if the trust was not part of the team environment.

**Relationships.** In the process of transferring collective learning, the ability to use the information learned from others had to be put into practice after a team meeting. The relationships in the four teams observed and interviewed all had elements of using collective information from their meetings and transferring the collective knowledge to their classrooms; however, the level of trust and caring for one another differed between each team. Focus Team A Participant brought to the forefront the topic of planning and creation of ideas: “We plan together, and we create together.” In contrast, Focus Team B Participants all voiced varying opinions around this area of transferring collective learning. Focus Team B Participant 1 stated, “In my PLC group, most members choose to teach however they want to, even if the team thinks it takes too long or is ineffective.”
Individual Interview Participant 1 stated, “I develop in my room a trusting and caring environment, not with my team. Every other teacher on the team will go to the principal and complain about the other team members.” If team members felt a lack of trust and caring within the team, then how could transferring of collective learning take place?

Individual Interview Participant 5 clearly defined the role of relationships within the team, “You must trust and work well with the students and team members. I feel I create this environment or atmosphere in my classroom and I help bring trust and caring to my team.”

Focus Team C Participant stated that the relationship of the team is very important. She also added, “We generally like each other.”

**Values and vision.** The ability to set a common goal or mission is a powerful challenge for all leaders. The ability for the teachers on the front lines to carry out the plan to accomplish the mission or goal is even more challenging. The proper alignment and direction is based upon the ability for teachers to interact and gain knowledge from one another. Focus Team D Participant clearly evaluated the purpose or mission of the school and team: “We must be open to expand our individual practices and grow one another to help all students; and then we must share and implement ideas that have proved to work in the field.”

The mission and vision of the school and school system was clearly noted with one participant’s answer, “Success is in the success of every student we encounter” (Focus Team C Participant). To understand if an organization has clearly communicated its direction, simply engage in conversations with its stakeholders and ask the question: What is the mission and vision of the school?

**Collective Learning.** While reviewing all transcripts and notes from each focus group, it became very clear that each team did not understand the collective learning. I constantly had to
explain the definitions of the words related to sharing ideas or learning from one another. This led to the use of focus group question 13 (see Appendix E) that asked the group to explain if teachers worked together to examine student work.

Focus Team C Participant quickly responded, “Yes, after a common assessment we will look at the data together and then analyze the strategies that worked and the ones that did not.” In this response the participant explained his or her role in collective learning. The participants shared what was working and what was not working.

To better understand his or her roles in collective learning in the classroom, Individual Interview Participant 6 highlighted, “We offer suggestions/tips/strategies for improving our students’ performance from benchmark to benchmark assessment.” The majority of responses were very similar to the responses stated above and within research questions one and three. The teachers within the teams understood they needed to share data and take what was shared to their classrooms. The key measure in chapter five addressed whether the teams were performing the right work.

Structures. The focus of any organization or team is the structures in place to allow the work to be completed at a high level of fidelity. The ability of the team to return collective knowledge to their individual classrooms was aided by simple structures put in place by the administration and central office. The research question was created during the review of related literature about adult learners and sharing ideas. Within the focus group questions (see Appendix E) and research collected individual interview questions, the purpose was to highlight items every PLC team needed to help with the process of sharing knowledge and using the knowledge in the classroom.

Focus Team A Participant stated, “I do not understand collective learning. However, we
learn together to reach our goals and to help all students.” She also stated, “We learn from our
common assessments, which we create and use to monitor progression of our students
throughout the school year.”

Focus Team C Participant explained his or her current PLC team structure, “We all use
common assessments; this means every test, quiz, or assignment is one we all use. I also feel our
regular meetings and planning periods aid this process of learning.”

Focus Team B Participant clearly aligned the process during a follow-up email about
collective learning. She stated “The relationship with my co-teacher and I have supports
collaborative learning, we share ideas and materials.” The basic structures established
surrounded their PLC teams and their teaching areas.

Research Question 5
What role, if any, does coaching or mentoring of teachers play in the PLC team? During
the investigation and review of literature, the process of peer observations and mentoring was
highlighted as a good practice to help other team members. The research question originated to
investigate if coaching or mentoring within PLC teams existed and/or if coaching or mentoring
benefited the PLC team structure.

Relationships. All the teams stated that they used informal introduction and transitions
within the team. The teams worked together during team meetings and separately from team
meetings. The identity of the teams was unique. The relationship within each team was also
very unique. Team A Participant discussed how important collaboration and common decisions
were to the process of deciding what was best for the students they served. In observations of
Team A, the relationships of team learning were at the forefront. Coaching and mentoring
within each team was not observed. During individual or focus group interviews, the idea of
coaching and mentoring did not surface as a formal practice with this group with team A.

**Values and vision.** During the investigation of PLC teams with Grizzly County High School, the focus and the vision of the school was defined from the central office leadership and the school level leadership. The idea of incorporating coaching and mentoring never arose from those discussions. An actual formalized plan or mandate of coaching and mentoring never materialized from the communication with team members.

**Collective learning.** The formalized process of coaching and mentoring, as part of a PLC process for teacher development was not observed during my time with all four teams. Team D Participants stated, “We could use a mentor program, and we feel it would used if we needed it” During observations of Team D, the body language of the team suggested they were very comfortable with each other and stating their opinions.

Team C participants repeatedly stated their pleasure with the PLC process as very beneficial to their teaching careers, and they had no desire to work in isolation.

**Structures.** To address research question five within the framework of coaching and mentoring, the values and vision portion connected like a puzzle piece to the overall structures of the PLC team. Team B Participants, stated, “We simply do not do this…our leader would be the one who would do this. We have no process for this.” The presence of formalized coaching and mentoring practices is not observed.

Team C Participants added to the communication and passion for working together without stating any information about a formalized values, visions, or structures around coaching and mentoring. A Team C Participant noted that “The team leader welcomes new members and we all help each other during difficult times, like a true team”.

Finally, Team D Participants loudly expressed their opinions on structure and vision for
collective learning, which does give voice to the informal process of coaching. Participant 7 stated: “We do not have enough turnover to address new members.”

**Research Question 6**

What challenges or barriers, if any, do participants identify that may prevent the transfer of instructional strategies in PLCs? During the process of observing, focus group interviewing, and individual interviewing, the differences among the four different teams shifted like the sands on the beach. The challenges and barriers identified were highlighted from the system structure(s) during the observation and focus group sections to more of a pinpoint laser-like focus during the individual interview portion of the data collection.

**Relationships.** Team A Participants highlighted the importance of all team members being present at all of the meetings. “The commitment to learning and helping each other is very important to the overall process of the team” (Participant 1 TA1). Team A Participant 2 stated openly, “We meet individually and talk outside of our planned time. This is beneficial to help if all members may have questions they did not ask during our scheduled meeting time.” He also stated: “I feel like this is not a hurdle or barrier to the process of instructional strategies.”

Team B expressed individually and collectively their open opinions about one another and the process. “Instructional strategies are definitely hindered because of our team” (Participant 4 TB1). Team B Participants made the following statements during the data collection process:

- The main communication is from our PLC leader and the rest of the team.
- We are motivated because it is mandated to do so.
- We present ideas…but they are rarely acted upon and are brushed off by other team members.
• Many of us feel more appreciated by other PLC teams.
• I started meeting with other PLC teams on the side.

The data collected came strictly from focus group interviews and individual interviews.

Participant 5 TB2 expressed her deep concern when questioned about non-productive PLC meetings: “Never productive, a complete waste of time, they turn into a gripe session or drama session.” Team B Participants did focus on the fact that they are a team, but not a tightly bound team.

Team C Participants expressed the overall pleasure with the process of their PLC team. On the same note Team C expressed concern during their review of the question during focus group interviews on challenges during this past school year. Participant 6 TC1 stated “We feel the central office only cares about the data, and we rarely get feedback about our data and the process of using the data.” Team C expressed its desire to obtain more information on understanding data and its ability to drive instruction to better see where their students are currently testing. The team members also expressed concern over the summative assessment process, and the sheer weight they are feeling heading into a world of many unknowns.

Participant 6 TC1 expressed great concerns: “The use of data is proven to help identify students at-risk for failure, but we need more training on how to use this daily in our classrooms.” She also stated: “I do use data in my classroom, but I sometimes wonder if I am doing this correctly?” In reviewing the list of reasons the PLC process worked for the team, some participants listed that data had a major impact on why this process was important, but many team members are confused or feel left alone on the feedback and effective use of the data. This could be directly tied to their trust, or lack thereof with the central office.

Team D expressed their focus on relationships during focus and individual interview
questioning. As stated earlier, Team D did express concern about challenges to the current and past school year. Team D Participant stated: “We feel the lack of time and the ability to motivate students is difficult. Especially during their senior year, motivation is a major factor after Christmas break.” She also stated: “The major challenge then here lies in the process and/or structure; making sure we are doing what is required.” The team agreed with this statement, even giving the classic agreement of “AMEN.”

**Values and vision.** In the area of values and vision, the focus of the PLC teams originates from the issues of driving student achievement and instructional strategies that align with the work of the teams. The four teams and the seven individuals selected to individually interview sent several key messages during my time collecting data. The values and vision of any team was vital to the success of the larger organization. When established teams looked at barriers, they behaved in ways that were comfortable to their own existences and sometimes modeled practices within the school.

Team A really focused on the positives of the PLC process and the growth of their team. One participant from the group reiterated the problem of too much paperwork, as the key to accountability for the team is a barrier to the process. Participant 2 TA2 stated “We need agendas for each meeting, and we need norms; however, sometimes it is like a check list to complete before the real work begins.” The group stated that this was a true hindrance to the learning curve for the PLC team as they look forward to next year.

Team B completely spun their story around the uncooperative nature of the team. This was expressed in focus group sessions and individual interviews. The responses from the individual interview request netted two participants from this team, which added to the depth from Team B. Team B Participant expressed: “We were forced to be on this team and be a
team.” Participant 4 TB1 overwhelmingly agreed with this statement: “We do not learn together and we respond to what the PLC leader decides to do.” The overall focus of the team was the dysfunction of the team.

Team C expressed the willingness of the group to follow rules and regulations set forth by the school leadership. Team C Participant expressed (and the entire grouped nodded in agreement),

We do not have major issues; we really like each other and feel we work well together.

One issue that leads to a negative impact on instructional work is due to the fact of last second or spur of the moment work or required activities. (Team C Participant)

The team also expressed the overall process of the PLC structure and set up was too much about the paperwork or checklist mandate. Participant 6 TC1 simplified the concerns this way: “TIME…we simply need more time or we need help making better use of our time.”

Team D listed several areas during interview sessions and email correspondence. Participant 7 TD1 explained, “We sometimes feel we are asked to change gears too much, we set high goals but simply need to stay on the course more often.” The group all pleaded to the fact that the process needed to be streamlined to make the team time much better than in years past.

**Collective learning.** Members of team A established their opinions on collective learning along with the other groups of not fully understanding what the phrase meant. After explaining the process and reworking the question during the interview process, the team shared the formal and informal techniques they use to acquire knowledge from other teachers and other professionals. Team A voiced concern universally that the reoccurring theme of the process of their PLC within the system and school of collective learning was overwhelming at times. Participant 1 TA1 suggested: “The PLC process coupled with state requirements many times led
the focus away from instructional sharing to checklist mandated completion.” Team A Participant stated with an exhausted face: “I feel we have too many assessments and we test entirely too much, we create barriers by mandating too many items.”

Participant 3 TA3 expressed “We do not use all aspects of the PLC process, I always come away from our meetings with something, but we could be more focused on instructional practices.” The team recognized the stance of all members performing better as a team.

Team B began the process, as described in earlier sections, as having issues with working together and sharing formal and/or informal learning. Team B Participants finally stated “We do not learn together at all as part of a plan or agenda, we are placed together to teach one subject area. We plan and pace together…we simply do not share learning.” The placement of the team and its composition led to a major barrier to learning and sharing instructional practices expressed end product.

During the data collection and analysis, Team C edged on the side of positive performances and relationships; but during the research of barriers and hindrances, the team expressed several areas that prohibited the team from PLC greatness. Team C Participant stated early on during the process, “We generally meet about what is coming up or coming at us from the state, central office, and building leadership.”

Team D expressed many areas of concern in dealing with barriers or hindrances to the process of adult learning. Team D Participant expressed “We share ideas and discuss ideas of teaching, but we really do not hold one another accountable to become better teachers and learners.”

Participant D later added, “Our true freedom and creativity is hampered and the lack of supervision by our leadership team allows norm practices and professionalism to be an
Structures. When reviewing research question six, I noticed key points that led to challenges or barriers. Challenges and barriers came in many different forms. When looking at the structure of the team and how they interact, the key ideas from member to member presented it as common themes or phrases. Even though each team was completely different, they share common areas of concerns, complaints, and hurdles.

Throughout the interview process, Team A was one of the most positive teams and individuals, but even they viewed challenges and barriers within the structure of the team and overall PLC process. Team A Participant remarked, “Paperwork is the major hold up in completing the PLC process. We simply take away time for productive meetings because we have to follow protocol.”

Participant 3 TA3 reiterated this point and added, “Please share the information to powers that be, we need to streamline this process to help us become better.” The barrier presented by the team led to a mandated initiative; however, they were making the best of the situation and still producing good results. Participant 2 TA2 stated the following: “We are doing a good job, but we are not doing all a PLC can do…not operating at full capacity.”

Team B openly expressed concerns, as a group and individually, surrounding challenges and barriers. The team felt one area of concern, which led to a barrier, was cancelling meetings, and/or not meeting, if one team member was absent. This led to a comment by Participant 4 TB1, “We have trouble finding a true time to meet when all of our members are present.”

Another area tied to meetings, and the process of meeting was the simple method of sharing data. Team B Participant stated, “We don’t share personal classroom data, we simply discuss when and how fast we teach certain areas of the curriculum.” Team B members also
expressed concerns on their path to becoming a true PLC. Team B Participant expressed the following statement, “Our leaders need to tell us what to do and show us what is expected; right now, we simply meet and follow the direction of our lead teacher.”

Team C expressed the need for better planning as a team, school, and district. During these conversations they expressed informal barriers to this process by not fully understanding transferring of learning. Team C Participant explained one major barrier: “We don’t have a plan in this area; we look at strategies based on general data, but we do not have a structure in place to handle this area.” The lack of a plan and the informal sharing of ideas seemed to be a barrier between team members, which affected the transferring of knowledge. Team C Participant expressed, “We meet no matter what the circumstances, but we rarely have all members present. This leads to no plan, no direction, and no communication.”

The final area of team challenges and barriers Team D highlighted were the non-productive meetings. The team had already stated the fact of not fully understanding a true PLC process, but they expressed their knowledge of the following:

- We currently do not share learning goals.
- We are too distracted by other problems such as, scheduling.
- We do not always focus on student learning.
- We don’t share enough ideas and learn from one another.

With all of this information being addressed or presented, the team expressed a need for better meetings and guidance. Participant 7 TD1: “I feel we can be a good team, but we simply don’t have all the right answers.”

Summary

The physical, emotional, and culture make-up of PLC teams such as Grizzly County High
School teams is complicated, and very difficult to simply make happen. The process took time to adapt and evolve to the needs of the teachers and most importantly the needs of all students. The key structures in place do not necessarily equate to an operation at 100% capacity, but it does mean they need to be able to help each other grow. The data collection and analysis led to a view into the world of PLC teams at a rural secondary school. The research highlighted the protocols, standards, and procedures required to enable a team to function as a professional learning community. Combining the two efforts laid the foundation of the patterns and emerging themes of this case study. In Chapter Five, I will report my conclusions about the four teams and the inner workings of their teams.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community (PLC) teams regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. Data collection for this study included teachers’ perspectives while working within their teams by (a) Collecting documents, (b) reviewing archival data, (c) observations, (d) focus group interviews, (e) Professional Learning Community Assessment online questionnaire, and (f) individual interviews. Throughout the development of this qualitative case study, the following research questions guided all aspects of the data collection:

1. How do teachers involved in PLC teams describe their understanding of the relationships between the team environment and sharing, transferring, and discussing learning at the secondary school level?

2. What do team members identify as their motivation for working together in their PLC team?

3. How does the design of the team meetings contribute to sharing, transferring, and discussion of learning? How does the team check for actual sharing of information?

4. How do participants describe their experiences of transferring collective learning in their classrooms?

5. What role, if any, does coaching or mentoring of teachers play in the PLC team?

6. What challenges or barriers, if any, do participants identify that may prevent the transfer of instructional strategies in PLCs?

During the phases of data collection and data analysis, an information process began to quickly to emerge. The four PLC teams really did not mind the PLC idea and thought of
collaboration; however, they did not fully understand the big picture of the vision of their school’s PLC. The four teams each shared positives and negatives, but they all expressed concern over the following areas: (a) use of data, (b) direction of what is truly expected, (c) streamlined PLC process, (d) a better understanding of collective inquiry or learning, and (e) more time to work on what is needed to be successful. As the study of the PLC teams at Grizzly County High School evolved, four themes emerged from the collection and analysis of data: (a) relationships within the team and school; (b) the values and vision of the team, school, and district; (c) collective learning of the team; and (d) team structure.

**Summary of the Findings**

Fullan (2014) stated that one of the most significant factors in driving student growth was leading teacher learning and development. This was also true in the sense that the teacher leaders who leveraged learning of other teachers in their groups generated greater learning across the school (Fullan, 2014). The teacher as a leader, and his or her role to help change the culture of the school, was a vital part of the success of any school. The principal needed to work with individual teachers; however, was there is often not enough quality time within the school day to meet the needs of all teachers. This was why quality PLC teams helped to drive school reform.

As stated earlier in Chapter One and Chapter Two, the lack of quality information surrounding PLC teams in a rural secondary school setting drove the need for this case study. The idea of the structure and composition of the team was very important, but the sheer act of sharing ideas and then transferring ideas to individual classrooms was at the forefront of the research. The viewpoint of the Tennessee teachers within in a rural secondary school was significant to understanding how to implement the process of collaboration to focus on student learning. The school’s four teams were placed by grade-level, which did not always seem to
mesh with the educators brought together. The summary of results followed the four key areas of the research to answer the research questions. The four key areas are: (a) relationships, (b) values and vision, (c) collective learning, (d) structures.

In many areas of life, people simply look towards the outcomes of tasks they perform. They are conditioned to analyze outcomes whether dealing with adults or children. The PLC team members were driven to make decisions based on data and how they react to the data. The four teams observed and interviewed all expressed their understanding of the place of data within the conversation of sharing and transferring knowledge. The one area lacking from the conversation was collective focus on the four driving questions of a true PLC, which were highlighted by Bailey, Jakicic, and Spiller (2014):

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if students are learning?
3. How will we respond when some students don’t learn?
4. How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who are already proficient?

The questions should formally and informally be a part of any PLC’s daily journey. Bailey et al. (2014) also suggested that teams must continue to use the four questions as a guiding process of the PLC team when they state, “It is the proverbial glue” (p.9). When observing and discussing the work of a PLC team, the research interlaces the responses around the four driving questions and the four identified categories discovered within this qualitative case study.

All four teams stated their disdain for the PLC process at times: “We are truly motivated at times by the fact this is a mandate placed upon us by our central office and is carried out by our building leaders” (Participant 4 Team B 1). This was not to say that they did not like the
collaborative process. The teams all found some aspect of learning during their time together. The teachers felt, at times, the amount of paperwork and collection of data did not allow them to fully use the full benefits of the PLC process. According to one participant, “We do not use all aspects of our PLC within our school and team” (Focus Group Participant Team C).

**Relationships**

The relationships of team members and their ability to share ideas, knowledge, and best practices were evident within every team. Not all teams were alike, but all did work together; however, at varying levels of agreement. During the study, when asked if teams shared information or learning, the focus group interviews and individual interviews highlighted different levels of trust, caring, and willingness (see Table 5.1).
Table 5.1 *Sample Team Responses.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>We discuss and share ideas, not always formally, but we do share information and use it in our classrooms. We are always free to contribute to the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>We do not share ideas, we listen to each other and teach the way we want to do. We agree on when and how fast to teach parts of the curriculum. We look at strategies based on feedback. We have an open discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>We use the data from common assessments and adjust our instruction. We do this informally and do not have a set plan. We follow the process and get to the finish line. We discuss other items too much, such as scheduling. We do share ideas informally and we do not fully understand the entire PLC process. How are we to use data to improve student achievement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information highlighted from each team gives a unique insight into the environment of the PLC teams. As noted, each team was different, but a theme emerged within the category of relationships. The lack of a formal process to evaluate team sharing of ideas and transferring the ideas into the classroom led to an item that was not monitored. A key feedback loop of open and honest discussion was missing. Student and teacher growth drove the gains in effective feedback during the school year.

Focus Team Participant B stated, “I don’t think we ever learn from one another, we simply share data with very little feedback.” The teams all agreed to the factor of self-
supervision and principal guidance. The four teams did not feel they had enough feedback to make them better. This was a direct connection with relationships and whether a team will truly discuss learning from their classrooms with their team. Timperley (2011) noted this factor when dealing with relationships with supervisors and teacher learning: “Coherence across professional learning environments was not achieved through the completion of checklists and scripted lessons, but rather through creating learning situations that promoted inquiry habits of mind throughout the school” (p.104). The principal or supervisor must be a learner with the teachers to create the culture of holding each other accountable.

**Values and Vision**

The alignment of the school’s main focus and direction and the team’s main focus and direction was vital to the success of the school. The moving parts must all be going in the same direction to make any process more successful. In the same light, the alignment between the researched PLC process and the PLC teams was very critical as well. Many, Soldwedel, and Van Clay (2011) suggested the school district and all of the schools should be aligned as a PLC by the following basic set up:

- **Mission** = Purpose
- **Vision** = Clear Direction
- **Values** = Collective Commitment
- **Goals** = Indicators, Timelines, and Targets

The PLC teams in my qualitative case study expressed varying degrees of alignment with the school’s mission and vision. The team members were all responsible for learning and sharing their learning experiences. Many et al. (2011) suggested that collective and continuous access to research and best practices were vital to the success of the team. If team members were
not learning from one another, then they were meeting as an act of compliance. Bagshaw (2014) made an interesting point when he stated, “When people choose to participate they are volunteers, but when they are mandated or forced they then become hostages”. This became the reason the participants believed or went through the motions. In each of the four teams, the more the belief they had in the process, the better the team functioned.

Another key aspect of the values and vision as it pertained to sharing of knowledge and practice was the clear and conscious approach of collaboration. Many et al. (2011) noted three areas of the team in which there should be growth and continuous support: (a) decision-making, (b) professional behavior, and (c) accountability and commitment. Of course, this did not happen unless the team had trusted and open communication. The team needed to feel comfortable and understand they were vulnerable in all situations. In each team, the proper use of norms did not occur during the meetings I observed. One of the aspects of PLCs was to establish norms and to agree upon the norms. During my time of observing and interviewing of the teams, I did notice the use of some aspects of alignment, and they completed what was monitored. The leadership team requested agendas and notes; every team completed this task after each meeting. So, to say the alignment with the values and vision of the school was not followed would not be a true statement, but the PLC process was the main emphasis of concern.

**Collective Learning**

As described earlier, the lack of understanding of the terms or phrases during the research immediately became apparent. None of the four teams fully understood the term collective inquiry. Each discussion or email led to the basic understanding and definition of what this meant and how this was presented within their team. It evolved to stating the ideas of sharing, transferring, and the process of discussion of learning from one another. This fit nicely into the
second themed area of the values and visions of the team, school, and district. During individual correspondence, I directly asked the participant if his or her team aligned with the mission and vision of the school. All individual participants expressed some understanding of the mission and vision, but their teams were either warm or cold on the alignment of the school, which means they either were aligned as a team or not fully aligned as a team. Of the seven interviewed, three of the seven felt their team was 100% aligned with the school’s mission and vision. The other four quickly stated there was some, but mostly no alignment. Participant 4 TB I expressed the following: “We do not have a clear mission or vision for our school, we are in the process of developing both, but our team does not follow the format from leadership.”

The belief in a mission and vision, which is measured by goals by the team during the process of a school year was vital to the success of student achievement. The team concept of sharing best practices and then implementing the best practices in the classroom was directly tied to the belief in the direction of the school. All four teams described areas of positives and negatives; however, the team had to find the purpose to drive student achievement effectively. Team A Participants expressed the following statements:

- Collaboration is the key to our goals.
- We use group discussion to determine what we want students to learn and how to assess them.
- We target areas of improvement.
- We work as a team.

All statements were very true, but did an area of sharing that should be a formal process of sharing and responding to the results in their classrooms. Even one of the best groups during this research process felt the need for collaboration, but they used an informal process to discuss
sharing of ideas. They were focused on student achievement, but there was a lack of accountability to check for transferring and sharing of effective ideas. As expressed by Helen Timperley (2011) earlier, the coherence of the process of learning by the adults and students was a true shift in culture within the school.

Teams C and D both expressed positives of sharing and using ideas. Team C Participant stated openly: “The process of sharing started out very positive and really has tanked from that point forward.” The group did not lay blame on leadership; they instead shifted to their lack of time fulfilling mandated steps and procedures established by BLLT and central office.

Team D Participant stated, “The process of our PLC is informative, supportive, and encouraging as we speak today.” This participant eventually was invited and accepted the offer for individual discussion. The participant followed up by stating that the process was overwhelmingly better than isolation. Participant 7 TD 1 stated, “Our team members must define the practice they are using in their classroom, set a timeline, identify the goal, and determine by use of data if the technique worked.” If this worked for the students, then the team would collectively transfer the technique in their classrooms.

**Structures**

Team B participants shed light onto a different area of team make-up and structure. The members expressed their knowledge of being placed by grade level and they felted they were not going to be successful. In discussion with district and school leadership, they acknowledged Team B was a genuine work in progress. The PLC team meeting was very productive in the sense of generating a plan to match the area of responsibility placed upon the team from district and school level leadership. The PLC teams make up and/or structure was very strategic in the planning process to optimize peak performance of a team. Participant 4 TB 1 quickly stated in
the individual interview process: “We do not come together to learn, we come together so that our ‘leader’ can tell us what to teach; no guidance on how to teach.”

Team B Participants jointly expressed their meeting time was focused on how long to instruct portions of the curriculum and when to assess the curriculum. They also stated this was mandated by school level leadership and they complied with mandates set forth by the school. The understanding of collective inquiry or learning directly related to the values and vision of the school. The lack of understanding of values and vision was exactly associated with the area lacking with each team, but each team dealt with the end product in different outlets. The teams at Grizzly County High School was established to develop a better understanding of curriculum, instruction, and student achievement success. Bailey et al. (2014) suggested the collaborative team was structured to perform the following tasks:

- Identify power standards or essential standards,
- clarify what each standard means,
- clarifying commitment to being responsible for all students, and
- vertically aligning with their essential standards or power standards.

During my time of observations, interviews, and questionnaire research, the four areas stated by Bailey et al. (2014) were not completely reviewed or accomplished. During my observation time, the semester had started with identifying standards to be taught and agreed upon. Nonetheless, during individual correspondence, I pushed in on the areas of vertical alignment and discussion of what to teach in questions 5-7 (see Appendix G). Participant 1 TA 1 expressed, “We meet vertically 2-3 times per year.”

Participant 4 TB 1 opposed this statement by stating, “We do not use vertical alignment meetings. We meet on use of curriculum maps.”
This leads back to the premise of each team; did they understand the structure of the PLC process in the school? This question was entrenched in my discussions and observations of the teams. In every aspect of the six research questions, the basic understanding of the big picture was the area in which they were lacking. During focus group discussions with the teams, they all listed aspects of either a lack of understanding of the process or a lack of time to deal with the process. Team A Participant stated, “We rarely speak about the function or overall process of the PLC, we simply don’t think about it at that level.” Eaker and Keating (2012) state it is essential for teams to understand the “big three ideas” (p.26) and understand the true commitment of everyone in the school.

The four categories, which emerged during data analysis, shed light on the true understanding of the six research questions, which drove this qualitative case study. Each team brought strengths and weaknesses to the study, but two teams established themselves as polar opposites. During data collection and data analysis, Team A seemed to be the most complete team with a true passion and understanding of the process. They used time to discuss their instructional practices and how to deliver more intensified help for their students. They created an encouraging atmosphere of trust and vulnerability. They celebrated their successes and learned from their mistakes.

Team B, on the other hand, followed the course of compliance; they truly completed the tasks of completion. They met to fulfill the requirements of the principal. The team did not speak highly on the promise of sharing ideas and understanding what others are doing. This team was a challenge for the members and for the school administration. The team members wanted to be part of other teams, and felt they were trapped in the area of compliance. This led to teachers to revert back to the area they felt comfortable; they simply completed their
instruction in a single silo to help their students.

Team C and D simply enjoyed the process of using their time together. They encouraged one another and shared best practices in an informal manner. Team D Participant simply defined the overall process as “informative, supportive, and encouraging as we speak today.” Team C Participant added; “This is my third year, the team is wonderful and helps me in so many ways.” The teams both seemed to be on the crest of becoming better, but without a true process of understanding the non-negotiables, the teams could simply float through out the school year without a true sense of purpose.

The true process of understanding is grounded in the ideas of DuFour and Eaker (2008). The PLC team must have a true understanding of the big three ideas:

1. Ensuring that students learn,
2. a culture of collaboration, and
3. a focus on results.

Teams must always focus on the four critical questions that drive the work of the PLC:

1. What do we want our students to learn or master?
2. How will we know they are learning?
3. How will we respond if they don’t learn?
4. How will we respond when they do learn/already know it?

In my research each team had pockets of success within these two areas, but much work is needed to fully understand what makes up a true PLC. The process of Professional Learning Communities at Grizzly County High School focuses on the true sense of a pathway to learn, but they actually monitored formative and summative results. This is an area of need to completely foster a collaborative culture and a system of learning for all students, teachers, and staff.
Discussion of the Findings

The qualitative case study surrounding Grizzly County High School set forth from the work of four PLC teams within one rural high school. The focus was on the transferring, sharing, and discussion of learning from the perspectives of teachers. The learning in many cases came across as student learning, and when we simply identify federal and state goals, the number of students proficient, and the growth of students during a school year, this encompasses the time. Within a PLC team, the process of learning for all was vital to the success of the PLC team.

Understanding Collective Learning

The PLC process was defined by DuFour and Fullan (2013) as an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collection inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. The two key areas of this case study definition are collection inquiry and action research. In my research of the teams, collective inquiry was often reached during an informal process of sharing ideas and suggestions. I did not observe action research of any kind for the purpose of sharing knowledge within the team or team members.

None of the four teams fully understood the process of collective inquiry or shared learning. During focus group discussion and individual discussion, I repeatedly defined the process or restated the meaning of the term. I observed several areas of informal attention to sharing the results of the classroom assessments and common formative assessments in varying degrees. Team A discussed the number of proficient and non-proficient students on common formative assessments. Team B discussed percentage of passing and failing students on current assessments and the amount of time needed to complete the refresher lesson and the next lessons.
Teams C and D discussed openly and honestly the use of data as the proof of a better instructional strategy. In many ways, the teams’ use of the PLC process was their formal way to share what was going on in their instruction and with their students.

**PLC Teams**

The set-up of the teams was very similar with common meeting times and common planning for many teachers. The size of the school led to this luxury and the benefit of a one-hour flex lunch, where all students ate lunch at the same time, and remediation, meetings, and other activities did not take away from instructional time. The basic understanding of team norms were highlighted and discussed with every team after the re-focus of the PLC process in January 2013. Team A really focused on its team norms and openly discussed the setting or resetting of the norms as the new year of instruction started. The basic understanding of the expectations seemed to play a role in the depth of knowledge shared by each team.

All teams understood they must produce data on benchmark assessments and common formative assessments, but the use of this data as it aligns with the process of sharing information with each other did not happen at the same levels. The number of students who scored proficient directed the accountability. The data were to be received by the principal and stored in a data notebook for the school, but the teams did not fully understand how to use this data. This data became summative with zero chance to give critical feedback and adjust instruction. During individual interviews and discussions, three of the seven teachers interviewed expressed a need for district level leadership to train the teachers on the use of data and provide feedback on the data in a timely manner. The Battelle for Kids (2009) gap analysis tool of PLCs highlighted that results orientation is best used with frequent common formative assessments, which were used to continuously monitor student growth.
According to Dufour et al. (2006) “leaders encourage autonomy and creativity within well-defined parameters and priorities that must be honored” (p.218). This describes a loose and tight relationship from the top of the organization downward and then from the teacher-level back upward. The team should have creativity but they must understand the priorities in order to operate. The teams all knew the priority to produce better results, but the ensuring that all students will learn was missing from a true focus on learning. Battelle for Kids (2009) highlighted six commitment levels for all PLC teams, which were guided by the work of DuFour, et al (2010). The six areas highlighted in Chapter Two are as (a) a focus of learning, (b) a collaborative culture, (c) collective inquiry, (d) action orientation, (e) commitment to continuous improvement, and (f) results orientation.

The six areas also highlighted the six major dimensions of the PLCA-R questionnaire. The process of comparison also aided in the narrowing down of the four major categories used in this qualitative case study. My categories were highlighted in the collection and analysis of each of the six research questions.

The four teams each expressed a growing need for a better set of expectations by building level leadership. The process of the PLC within the school needs a better way to hold each team accountable and a process for the team to hold each member accountable. The use of team norms and the acceptance of the team norms were lacking within all four teams. Osceola County Schools (2010) developed a PLC Handbook for their district schools and teams. They suggested teams must create their own norms and read the norms at the beginning of each meeting. Even after the re-focus, the teams rarely identified the norms they were adhering to and which norms they were breaking. Team A did utilize their norms more than any other group. This is why a key part of my data analysis fell under the category of relationships.
What type of relationships did team members engage in? All four teams met at school and shared basic information about their students and their classrooms. The team that released instructional barriers and came forward in a trusting environment showed a more common understanding of how to work within the PLC process. The loose and tight relationship became a working element to help make each team member better. Vesico et al. (2008) stated that a school team is a client-oriented and knowledge-based culture where high quality relationships lead to the open practice in ways to encourage sharing, reflecting, and taking risks to change. The key is to have a non-threatening environment where all feedback discussions can take place. Learning Forward leaders (2012) suggested teacher-learning communities should work within the environment of alignment, analytic, caring, reflective, and inquiring to collaborate in learning what is necessary to increase student growth and learning. This was an extremely difficult area for many secondary schools where teachers are very accustomed to working in isolation. When teams were selected, there had to be an avenue of mutual trust and respect. If a school system did not provide avenues for educators to relate, form social interaction, and build collaborative culture, then the obstacle of meeting to meet is an unavoidable outcome (Hord & Sommers, 2008). In my observations and correspondence with the teams, the school did not align and/or provide avenues for educators to build this social trust.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the collection phase and analysis phase of data, Teams A, B, C, and D all expressed some comfort over the use of data and the amount of data. During focus group discussions and even in individual interviews, many team members placed blame on the Tennessee Department of Education for over-testing and over-piloting new testing models for the upcoming PARCC assessment. After initial discussion, the conversation was guided to the area of not fully
understanding what data is collected and how to effectively use the data. The PLC process
established at the school required all teams to share common formative assessment data with
their principal. The principal would then share the data information with the central office. One
missing link with all teams, with the exception of Team A in many cases, was the discussion of
how the team would change instructional practices to align with the results of the data. Some


team members expressed the desire to have upcoming professional development on how to use
the data. In many ways, the use a collective inquiry process of sharing more information and
learning from one another would better aid the area of adult learning. The formative assessment
process highlighted by researchers Paul Black and Dylan William (2013) shed light on how the
minute-by-minute tracking of student learning can also be applied to team adult learning.

The final area of my discussion is the area of proper feedback from building level
leadership and the central office. Team C and D participants openly stated, “We truly do not
know our intended outcome or result. We know we need to increase student learning, but we do
not know what success looks like as a team.” The teams expressed their lack of accountability
within their teams and within the school for the work of the team, other than the mandated
completion of the team agenda and notes.

Individual Participant 4 TB1 explained in one of our first meetings, “We discuss better
ways to instruct particular lessons, but we do not have a set way to hold one another
accountable.” In the PLC process, a collective commitment to the cause of the team is the
accountability factor to hold our fellow adult learners to the standard of the PLC process of
becoming a better educator and helping all students learn.

The principal and the central office staff felt and basically understood it was impossible
for their staff to be present at all meetings. This was vitally important for their team leaders to
carry the message of collective commitment and collective learning back to the team. This process would help in the area of accountability and a basic understanding of the process. The re-focus mentioned in earlier discussions was meant to be a revival movement for the district and schools. Discussion and data collection revealed that the re-focus did very little to drive the changes needed for the school’s PLC teams. I feel the accountability portion of the discussion would be resolved with the re-working of team norms, collective commitments, and collective learning from one another.

In summary of the discussion of the results, the teams shared highlights and low points during this journey. Team A functioned on the highest level of the four teams in regards to my research and teams C and D were progressing towards a better understanding of the learning process. Team A openly used an agenda and kept their meeting time truly on student achievement, instructional practices, and educational sharing of ideas. Team B went through a year of tough working conditions and mandated outputs. The areas of concern highlighted come down to a need to re-work all teams. This process is a natural process in implementing and developing a PLC. This is the learning cycle of every team and relates to the learning struggles of the students we face every day in the classroom. Each team will have a different ending point and, when school begins in the fall, a different beginning point. The re-working of the teams should be focused in on the four driving questions of a PLC (DuFour, 2004):

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned?
3. What will we do if they do not learn?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

This work and the true response of the school should facilitate avenues of social bonding and
trust and enable each team to have collective commitments, collective norms, collective goal setting, and a collective trusting culture.

**Study Limitations**

The design of this qualitative case study began with limitations from my area of expertise of professional learning communities, which grew significantly during the research journey. During my time in education, I never participated in a teacher team as a PLC. I have led the initial introduction and implementation of the PLC process with my school as a principal and with other school systems as a state employee working with the Tennessee Department of Education.

The school system and school set forward several limitations during my research process. A rural high school setting within a system that only features one large high school in the county was one limitation. In addition, as stated by Grizzly County Schools Supervisor of Curriculum, this is a school system that implemented the PLC process in 2009 and has varied degrees of success in all of the schools. Another limitation to this case study was the use of only one school, and only requesting three teams to observe. After my initial observation, I decided to add one more team to fulfill the request of the building level principal. The selection of one subject area within the school, and use of four grade level teams selected upon request of the principal at Grizzly County High School was yet another limitation.

The next area of limitations was the competency level of the teams of the PLC process. Another limitation highlighted during my initial meeting with the Director of Schools, was the selection of a new principal a year prior to my arrival and his decision not to change aspects of the PLC process during his first year. This led to a major decision by the principal to have a re-focus of the PLC process during my observation schedule and focus group time. I shifted
individual interview questions to address the refocus or retool of the PLC process to ask for reaction to this change.

The purpose of this study was to have a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers in a PLC team and their ability to transfer and share knowledge within the team. The limitations mentioned directed some facets of this qualitative case study, but a majority of the aspects were out of my control. This did play a factor in some of my results and altered some areas of my findings. I feel the re-focus might have been emphasized because of the required “revival meeting” attended by building level leadership and my involvement in the school during the fall of 2012. The building level leadership became more understanding of my position at the school and the teams became more understanding of my role as we explored the PLC process from their perspectives.

Implications

In this instrumental qualitative case study, one bounded system was selected and researched. Within this holistic approach of data collection and analysis, the process of PLCs shed light on an in-depth look into the world of a rural secondary school and its four PLC teams. The implication of this research was to open a window into the concept of identifying the idea of sharing, transferring, and implementation of best practices from a team to an individual teacher’s classroom. The ability of a team to collaborate and share knowledge, whether it is in the arena of data, instructional practices, ongoing collective inquiry, and the use of formative and summative assessments.

DuFour and Fullan (2013) suggest the PLC process calls for learning together in the following ways:

(a) Study curriculum frameworks, (b) Attempt to translate specific knowledge and skills
to students, (c) Decisions around instructional unit pacing, (d) Effective ways to assess students in their classrooms, (e) Analysis of the assessments, and (f) Together decide which instructional strategies will benefit students after assessments. (p.15)

This is an everyday process, which starts within schools and builds out from team to team. The research conducted of the rural school PLC team shares implementation ideas around how to incorporate teachers within the training cycle of the PLCs.

The PLC process suggests the continuous review of data to properly guide instruction (DuFour & Eaker, 2008). This research opens the door for the review of the process of implementation and the re-working of PLC teams. The use of data and sheer amount of data which bombards teachers is overwhelming work. This study provided an understanding of the PLC process within a rural school and how the teachers have more control over data than they might imagine. Because assessing students should be an ongoing process; the school system should review findings and explore options of job embedded professional development surrounding the use of data within a PLC team. The study also sets in motion the ability for Tennessee school districts and higher education institutes to understand the role of collaboration and trust within a team in a rural setting.

The majority of the state of Tennessee is rural, so the process of PLCs seems to lead to growing frustrations of teachers when components of the PLC team are not in place. Two vital components are data usage and collective inquiry within a collaborative culture. The overall process of a trusting and caring environment must be manufactured by the building level leadership and the team, which must be given full concentration each school year. DuFour and Fullan (2013) made it very clear which drivers should drive clarity and coherence within a PLC implementation:
• Capacity building;
• social capital (the quality of the group);
• instruction; and
• system, school, and team.

The overall findings of this research support the most current research, which is highlighted above; increasing the awareness of the composition of the team and how they interact plays an important role in the success or lack of success of teacher and student learning. In the rural areas of Tennessee, many schools are set in isolation. With the help of outside resources such as Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) and Battelle for Kids, the schools have the ability to pool resources and better mold their strategic district plans around the needs of their schools. The research enables leaders to understand key components of a team, and where there might be potential barriers within the process.

This study also initiates the vital role of leadership within the PLC process that then leads to the role of teacher leaders within a team. The study also concurs with the latest research from Fullan (2014) as he states, “School leadership is the driver for change, which in turn focused on the development of four interrelated forces; building capacity, school climate, community ties, and instructional guidance system” (p.73). The study garners support for the notion that the leader must learn with the teachers and enable their teachers and students to ensure mastery in all areas of the learning environment. The study shed light on team interaction and the challenges a school leader must overcome in order to improve the climate and culture of his or her school.

The final area in which this study familiarizes the ideas of the PLC process is in the area of teacher development within the rural setting and, most importantly, in the secondary setting. When districts set forth on the task of implementing PLCs or the even a tougher task of re-
working their PLCs, they must familiarize the teachers with the book *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2010) as suggested by Bailey et al. (2014). The book communicates the ground-laying facts and myths around PLCs.

The most important areas concluded within this study and most recent research is the importance of collective culture and collective commitment. The mission, vision, commitments, and values of a school and the level of understanding by the teachers are the driving forces in school reform. This study sheds light on the world of true teacher teams and their struggles throughout a school year. The study allows schools to understand common barriers and uncommon barriers as it is related to the most current research related on PLC implementation and commitment.

**Recommendations**

The findings of this study open the door for more research on the understanding of the PLC process within a rural secondary school setting. With the limited amount of research surrounding PLCs and secondary schools, this setting could generate several areas for future research. More case studies should be developed surrounding the transferring of best practices of different teams within the secondary school, such as math, social studies, science, and other disciplines. One in particular would be the strong connection of Career Technical Education (CTE). The research and findings of these studies would validate and strengthen the findings of this qualitative case study.

**Non-Traditional PLC Teams**

During the research collection phase of this study, several themes emerged which led to the future research of non-traditional PLC teams. Future research should be conducted on the
role of technology and its use within the rural setting. Some rural schools are very small and may only have one teacher in a subject area. The use of online teams is a new area where further research is needed. This leads to another aspect of future research involving a possible revisit or replication of this study of the same teams after the implantation of online testing in Tennessee during the fall of 2014. The relationships and collective inquiry should change as well with full implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the PARCC assessment. More research will be needed to fully understand their impact on the rural secondary school and the PLC process.

**Principal’s Role**

Future research is also needed on the role of the secondary school principal and sustainability of the PLC process within schools. The role of leadership is a constantly changing area; more research is greatly needed to see the relationship of leaders’ actions upon the PLC teams they lead.

Further research is also needed on school-to-school comparisons. This should be done comparing the schools as well as the leaders within the building. Eventually, this could lead to a system-to-system comparison for research purposes.

**Student Achievement**

The final area of suggestion is the area of student achievement and the summative assessment driver. In many rural districts, the term “more bang for your buck” goes hand-in-hand with school reform. A future study could focus on true outcomes based implementation and management of a rural PLC process versus a true culture capacity building shift. This area would be vital to express the understanding that the PLC process must be driven by the proper drivers, as highlighted earlier.
Secondary School PLC Team Comparisons

Further research is also needed on a comparison of PLC teams from different settings within the state of Tennessee. A future study would produce more substantial research surrounding the inner workings of PLC teams. A suggested comparison should be to compare PLC teams from different schools. For example, urban PLC teams compared to rural PLC teams at the secondary school level. A suburban PLC team could also be included in the same study. The study expands upon on the team collaboration process identified within this case study.

Four Stages of Teams

PLC team design research is needed surrounding Allenman’s (2004) four stages of teams. I believe understanding team development in the environment of rural secondary schools would greatly expand the reform efforts of rural schools in Tennessee. As stated earlier, the principal placed teams within Grizzly County Schools either grade-level or subject area. Exploring levels of forming, storming, norming, and performing could expand the basic understanding of team development in the rural education field (Allenman, 2004).

PLC Implementation for Rural Schools in Tennessee

The final recommendation for secondary school and central office leadership is to fully understand the process and journey of a true PLC. I suggest school systems align the system around a true mission and vision with true non-negotiables, which outline the beliefs of the stakeholders. DuFour et al. (2010) stated that every organization must ask the following question “Why do we exist?” (p.30). The school system should establish a true sense of shared leadership and monitor and check with fidelity the delivery of the message to all stakeholders within the system. The four driving questions of a PLC system must drive the daily work of the
school that all students can learn. I suggest schools visit the website All things PLC (http://www.allthingsplc.info). Develop a central office leadership team to help drive the work of the PLC teams. Demonstrate to all principals, teachers, and students the focus is on learning for all. Hold each other accountable for the success of every student. Truly work to change the culture of the system and work towards identifying quality instruction and celebrate every success through out the journey.

**Conclusion**

The results of this qualitative case study highlighted the perceptions of teachers’ within a rural secondary school setting and working as a PLC team to share, transfer, and discuss learning. The relevant and rising themes were established within four concrete areas: (a) relationships, (b) values and vision, (c) collective learning, and (d) structures. The grade subject area, which was selected by the principal at Grizzly County High School, sent forward from the findings of this study that the teams needed more constant feedback surrounding data and the proper use of the data, the proper use and importance of using team norms at the beginning of every meeting, the process of collective learning and/or inquiry as it relative to adult and student learning, and the overall revamping of the process of checks and balances of the PLC teams.

The ongoing cycle of learning should be at the forefront of learning for all, and the proper strategy enabling all team members within the school. The hope is that rural schools and systems will use the study to better understand barriers they face as they re-culture their schools and confront the new challenges of school reform.
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# Appendix A

The Case Study Report

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<th>Case Study: PLC Teams # _______</th>
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Appendix B

July 13, 2012

Allen C. Pratt
IRB Approval 1371.071312: Teacher Perspectives of Professional Learning
Community Teams with Respect to their Sharing of Best Practices: A Case Study

Dear Allen,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling
Appendix C

CONSENT FORM
Teacher perspectives of professional learning community teams with respect to their sharing of best practices
A Qualitative Case Study
Allen C. Pratt
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of teacher perspectives of PLC teams in a secondary school setting in a rural school environment in Tennessee. You were selected as a possible participant because of your efforts in your PLC team. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by

Allen C. Pratt
Doctoral Student
Liberty University

Background Information:
The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the perspectives of teachers involved in professional learning community teams regarding the environment in which they operate to share, transfer, and discuss learning. At this stage in the research, teacher perspectives of professional learning community teams will generally be defined as the understanding of research based best practices or collective inquiry of best teaching practices and their sharing of best practices.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
1. Observation of PLC team meeting (1 or 2 days) (More if needed)
2. One focus group interview session coincide on the same day. Only one
3. Complete online PLCA revised questionnaire (15 minute completion) emailed link
4. Possible selection to participate in individual interviews begins one week after completion of online questionnaire.
5. The data collection process concludes in only one month.
6. All interviews and observations will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.
7. Compensation and Rewards at completion of data collection

The timetable for this process is during the fall semester or spring semester of the 2012-2013 school year.

Risk and Benefits of being in the Study: There are no more risks involved in this study than a participant would encounter in everyday life.
The only benefit of participating in this study is the expansion of PLC knowledge to other rural school systems. The benefit is overwhelmingly helping other rural teachers in their educational journey.

Compensation:
The compensation for your participation in the case study research:
1. Observation and focus group interviews: Free lunch from Subway
2. Online PLCA completed on time: Wal-Mart gift card for $10.00

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3. All eligible participants (Must not withdraw) entered to win $100.00 Wal-Mart gift card
4. Individual interview participants will receive dinner the day of interviews, customized flash drive, and $25.00 Wal-Mart gift card
5. All compensation rewards will be presented at the conclusion of data collection
6. If you withdraw from research you will not receive compensation

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The study will use three focus groups. The researcher cannot assure that other participants will maintain the subject's confidentiality and privacy.

How to withdraw from the Study:
All participants have the right to withdraw from the research at anytime. All information deleted or shredded with a connection to the participant effective as soon as withdraw notice is received. If a participant does not complete their portion of the data collection, they will also not be eligible to receive rewards or incentives. All compensation rewards will be presented at the conclusion of data collection.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Warren County Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Allen C. Pratt. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you’re encouraged to contact him at (omitted). You may also contact Dr. Andrea Ray Committee Chair for this study at (omitted). If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, (omitted). You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ (Please check the box) I give permission for the researcher to audio record interview sessions and observation sessions.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

(Investigator)
Appendix D

Observation Protocol for Grizzly County Schools PLC Team Observations

Protocol information developed from Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2006).

1. Introduce myself prior to the observation session.
2. Try not to stand out or to affect the natural flow of activity.
3. Use good judgment determining whether to participate in certain types of activities.
4. Simply document what you observe, taking care to distinguish it from my own expectations.
5. Document what is actually taking place.
6. Use pseudonyms for all participants and locations.
7. Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.
8. Leave space to expand on observation notes.
9. Take notes strategically. Make only brief notes during data collection.
10. Use shorthand/ code and keep code table of contents on hand.
11. Make sure to cover a range of observations: conversations, body language, moods, and/or attitudes.
12. Make sure to stay for the entire length of the meeting.
Appendix E

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Interview Questions

Questions: (Research Questions: RQ with number 1-6)

Professional Learning Community Team Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about your experience(s) with PLCs. (RQ 1)
2. Tell me how the PLC team comes together to learn (RQ 1-3)
3. How do team members determine what they want to learn? (RQ 2-3)
4. What is number of team members needed to have a meeting and why is this important? (RQ 3,5,6)
5. How team members transfer learning into their classrooms and how can you prove this? (RQ 3-5)
6. Do team members meet with each other independently of the team and is this encouraged? (RQ 3,6)
7. What are some challenges your team faces during a given school year? (RQ 6)
8. What structures support collective learning? (RQ 1-5)
9. How do you communicate with each other? Moreover, how do you communicate with other groups? (Examples) (RQ 1,3,4)
10. How do you communicate ideas, results, or strategies to the school community and local community? (RQ 2)
11. What motivates you to participate in the PLC team concept? Why? (RQ 2,3)
12. How does the team support new members of the team? Process? (RQ 5)
13. Do teachers work together to examine student work? Please explain. (RQ 3-4)
14. Does your team have open-ended meetings about the foundation of PLCs and your school? If so how is this recorded and used? Please explain. (RQ 6)

15. What is the least amount of time your team spends meeting each week? Please explain. (RQ 1)

16. How does the school or school system hold PLC teams accountable? (RQ 2-3)

17. How are teams evaluated to see if they are adding value? (RQ 1,3,4)

18. Is there anything else regarding your experience with PLC that you would like to add? (RQ 1)
Appendix F

April 14, 2011

Allen Pratt
Doctoral Student
Liberty University

Dear Mr. Pratt:

This correspondence is to grant permission to utilize the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) as your instrument for data collection for your doctoral study through Liberty University. I believe your research on perceptions of principals, teachers, and stakeholders in Tennessee will contribute to both the research literature and provide valuable information to schools in relation to aspects of professional learning communities. I am pleased that you are interested in using the PLCA-R measure in your research.

Upon completion of your study, I would be interested in learning about your results. If possible, I would appreciate the opportunity to receive raw data scores from your administration of the PLCA-R. This information would be added to our database of PLCA-R administration. I would also be interested in learning about your entire study and would welcome the opportunity to receive an electronic version of your completed dissertation research.

Thank you for your interest in our research and measure for assessing professional learning community attributes within schools. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dianne F. Olivier

Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor
Joan D. and Alexander S. Haig/BORSF Professor
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
College of Education
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Appendix G

Individual Interview Questions
PLC Team Research
Liberty University
Allen Pratt

Name: ________________________________  Grade Level: __________

Cell: ________________________________

Team: _________________  Participant: ______________

Please answer the following questions detailing a more in-depth lens into your PLC team and the structures that support your work. Be open and honest. Your answers will not be shared with district leadership or school leadership. Your name and cell number will not be used during this research and your team grade level will not be identified. Each team will be referenced as Team A, B, C, or D and Participant TA1, TB2, etc. Thank you for your time and attention.

1. How do you as an individual use the data in the team setting? (Benchmark, Formative Daily Assessments, Common Formative Assessments, and Summative) Please explain.
2. How do you as an individual use the data in the classroom setting?
3. Do you feel your team aligns with the Mission and Vision of the school and district? Give evidence to support your answer.
4. When or why do some PLC meetings non-productive? Give examples
5. How are trusting and caring relationships in my classroom and PLC team developed?
6. How is vertical alignment used in your school? Example: 9th – 12th English
7. Do you participate in cross-curricular meetings? Please explain
8. What structures support collective learning within your PLC team? Give examples.
9. How does the school’s leadership team evaluate your PLC team? Please describe.
10. How did the re-focus of the PLC process at Christmas break help the PLC structures and supports from the Leadership Team?
11. What areas could the PLC process be improved for the next school year? Please items.

Please feel free to add any other comments about the PLC process in the space below:
Appendix H

Focus Group Interview Seating Chart

Interviewer

PLC Team A, B, C, or D Members

Research Assistant