TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

A Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

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May 2010

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Teachers are the focal point for institutionalizing sustainable educational reform. The pivotal point of educational reform revolves around the opportunities for professional growth of teachers. For many schools, the implementation of professional learning communities is serving as the road map for creating opportunities for effective professional growth.

This qualitative study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for substantiated ongoing and effective professional growth. The study's methodology applied the use of focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observations.

The Professional Learning Communities Assessment (Oliver, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003) was utilized to assist in the determination of an appropriate setting for the study. At the time of the study, the selected site had operated for more than five years as a professional learning community. According to the results of the Professional Learning Community

Assessment, the selected site met the criteria for being at the institutionalized stage in the phases of development of a professional learning community.

Data from the participant observations, focus group interviews, and individual interviews were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory. Based on the analysis of the data, five overriding themes emerged: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, 5) Change Agent. The five emerging concepts were used as the framework for discussion.

The findings endorsed that the teachers involved in this study did perceive professional learning communities as a framework and foundation for promoting and sustaining ongoing, effective professional growth. The level of effective professional development depicted opportunities for "professionals coming together in community to continuously learn in order to increase their effectiveness so that students become increasingly successful learners" (Hord, 2007). A professional learning community inspires educators to bring together their expertise, knowledge, and enthusiasm in an effort to learn from one another with a vision of improving student achievement.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Background

Recent studies provide evidence supporting the idea that teachers are one of the most critical elements of school reform (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dufour, 2004; U. S. Department of Education, 2007). Gaff, Ratcliff, and Associates (1997) endorse this statement by reporting,

> powerful educational settings result from factors beyond the form and content of the curriculum. Rich, rigorous learning environments, active participation on the part of students and faculty and a sense of community make a positive, often profound difference in fostering student success. (p. 457)

Studies conducted by the United States Department of Education in Tennessee and Texas found that students who had highly effective teachers significantly outperformed students who had ineffective teachers (The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, [NCTAF], 1996). Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) state, "teachers are necessarily at the center of reform, for they must carry out the demands of high standards in the classroom" (p. 916). Research (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Strahan, 2003) confirms that high quality teaching promotes gains in student achievement. However, for teachers to maintain a high level of quality, they should be provided with opportunities for continuous growth (Guskey, 2003).

Progress and change for our educational system and the future success of students is ultimately dependent upon the professional growth of teachers. In their recent work, Garet et. al. (2001) declared, "teacher professional development is a major focus of systemic reform initiatives" (p. 916). According to Louis and Marks (1998), "researchers studying the organization of effective school have regarded the development of professionally enriching work groups as a major facilitator of commitment and effort with the potential to improve student learning" (p. 533). The National Commission on Teaching and American's Future (1996) presented five recommendations for achieving a quality educational program that meets the needs of all children. One of the five recommendations is to "reinvent teacher preparation and professional development" (p. 5). Hord (1995) stresses that "teacher development is the flip side of the coin of school change. Unless teachers become more effective at what they're doing, schools will not improve" (p. 34).

Unfortunately, the traditional trends in professional development do not necessitate the changes in teaching that would substantiate opportunities for school reform (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Guskey, 2003). Traditional structures of professional development have not proven to be successful in promoting professional growth or helping foster institutional change (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Hord, 1995). Conventional conceptualizations of teacher workshops promote isolated and unrelated lecture style formats of professional development and ultimately prevent the creation of an educational structure that will challenge every student and teacher to meet their greatest potential (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Guskey, 2006).

To bring about significant changes that will meet the demands of educational reform, an effective systemic process that promotes ongoing professional growth for every teacher

and administrator should be ascertained (Danielson, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1998; NCTAF, 1996). At the forefront, this process must embrace a structure that involves collaboration, reflection, and evaluation (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2003). Hord (2007) elaborated that professional development depicts "professionals coming together in community to continuously learn in order to increase their effectiveness so that students become increasingly successful learners." Studies (Rasmussen, Hopkins & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Roy & Hord, 2003) indicate that effective professional development should be characterized as coherent, researched based, and capacity building. King and Newmann (2004) emphasize that "the design of professional development should be grounded not only in how individual teachers learn, but also in a conception of how schools as organizations affect and are affected by teachers' learning" (p. 26).

The implementation of *professional learning communities* in some schools serves as a framework for developing continuous, effective professional growth for teachers and administrators. A professional learning community, according to Burnett (2002), is a

> school where people are united by a common purpose, shared vision, collective commitments, and specific, measurable goals; where collaborative teams engage in action research and collective inquiry into the big questions of teaching and learning; where continuous improvement cycles are built into the routine practices of the school; and where gathering evidence of student learning is a constant focus. (p. 52)

The collaborative structure of professional learning communities creates an environment that continuously nurtures collegiality and endorses practices of reflection and evaluation. The isolation that the traditional structure of the classroom creates is overturned by the opportunities for ongoing professional dialogue and peer interaction (Strahan, 2003).

Juxtaposed to traditional professional development, professional learning communities specifically focus on that which is relevant to the individual needs of a school. The focus of a professional learning community is discovered through the disaggregation of multiple forms of data (Dufour, 2004; Hord, 1997b). Professional learning communities create a systematic open process that encourages change within the educational environment by engaging teachers and administrators in the process of learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). Hord (2007) maintains that

> because all change and improvement is dependent on learning, the professional learning community is a structure and a way of working that provides the environment in which principals and teachers set about intentionally learning to increase their effectiveness, and, subsequently, increase student results. (Southwest Regional Educational Service Alliance Conference, 2007)

Problem Statement

Despite the substantial amount of research that has been conducted in the field of effective professional development and professional learning communities, minimal research was found that evaluated teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of professional learning communities as a tool for promoting professional growth. Current literature discusses the role of professional learning communities, the benefits, the design, and the role of the administrators in the implementation and sustainability. This study was designed to provide insight into whether or not teachers felt that professional learning communities brought forth and substantiated ongoing and effective professional growth opportunities. To provide focus for this research, the following questions were developed:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities?
2. Are professional learning communities perceived by teachers as opportunities for professional growth?
3. Does participation in a professional learning community create continuous and relevant professional development that is sustained?

The findings of this study could create significant changes in the educational structure by creating a more effective and beneficial professional growth plan for teachers. This study examined teachers' perspectives on professional learning communities as a key component to creating schools that can meet the professional needs of the teaching population. Insights obtained through this research should prove useful in the development of teacher preparation programs and in planning and implementing effective professional development for teachers.

Significance of the Study

Researcher's Stance

At the onset of my professional career as an administrator, I was asked to accept the position as principal at an elementary school in North Carolina. Upon the acceptance of this position, I began analyzing the data to determine the overall needs of the school. Through the course of disaggregation of the data, I determined that the school needed to implement instructional strategies that would promote a more intensive level of student engagement.

The first year at the school, I spent significant time in the classrooms modeling, observing, and providing teachers with feedback on instruction. Because of the need for radical changes in the way the teachers were instructing students, I budgeted a considerable amount of money to send teachers to various workshops. The primary mode of selecting workshops to attend was teacher's individual interest. However, the workshops that the

teachers selected did have to have an element that would support the vision at the school to create a more engaging learning environment.

Teachers attended multiple workshops and seemed energized by the information obtained at the workshops. Many of the teachers even shared what they had learned during staff and grade level meetings. Unfortunately, the energy and enthusiasm for the concepts that had been learned at the off site workshops were not transmitting into the classroom environment. The information brought back from the workshops could often be found on a shelf with many other "great" workshop ideas.

As I continued daily walk throughs and observations I began to notice a pattern of continuation of the same instructional strategies that had been used at the school for many years. Teachers were not bringing what they had learned into the classrooms. Many of the teachers reported that they just did not have time during the school year to implement the new concept, but that they would attempt to look over the materials and implement the concepts at the beginning of next year.

As a result of the teachers' participation in the traditional, one meeting workshop approach, classroom instruction did not change, therefore neither did student achievement. In fact, according to various forms of data, the school demonstrated no growth in student achievement that year.

I was devastated by the results. Consequently, I spent significant amount of time re-examining the information and analyzed every aspect of the professional development program that had been implemented during the course of the year. As a principal, I had done everything that I had been taught to do as an instructional leader. Hours were spent modeling, observing, and providing sound research based constructive feedback for the

teachers. Every teacher had attended some type of off campus workshop and many of the teachers attended multiple sessions. I could not understand why the school had not experienced changes in the educational program at the school.

As I reflected on the year, I discussed my frustration with an administrative colleague in hopes that she would be able to shed some light on what aspect of the professional development puzzle had been missed. Much to my surprise, my colleague shared the same concerns. She had implemented a similar approach in providing professional development opportunities for her staff. It was through this conversation that I became concerned about the overall approach that most schools were taking in providing professional growth opportunities for teachers. As educational leaders, money was being invested in a professional development program that had little or no impact on professional growth or student achievement.

Most educational leaders agree that change in the way professional growth opportunities are provided for teachers is critical if the needs of children are going to be met and student achievement is to be improved. Educational leaders are searching for strategies to improve the structure for professional development. However, effective educational leaders, who serve as change agents, also know that regardless of the need for change within the traditional format of professional development that change cannot and will not occur without buy in from teachers. For lasting change to be fully implemented at the school, teachers must have the opportunity to construct their own understanding for the concepts. In a study conducted by McLaughlin (1976), it was revealed that lasting reform in the classroom results from the "developmental process of mutual adaptation" (as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. 180). Effective change must be relevant and adapted to the

needs of the specific school setting therefore creating a natural developmental process of adaptation to occur.

To accommodate change, administrators and the teachers must learn the population and understand the culture of the school and develop a comprehensive understanding of the problems that are preventing the school from achieving its ultimate level of success. Change is a process that should evolve over time. Forced change is not lasting change. Educational leaders should be leery of implementing a change without support of the teachers. If educational reform is to have a lasting effect, changes must be imbedded in the foundation of the individual school setting. "Researchers argue that a "culture of resignation" among teachers and principals in main city schools prevents the physiological investment of staff in the hard work necessary to change an institution" (Anyon, 1997, p.172).

Teachers and administrators should also have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and practices of effective school settings. Educational administrators need to develop teacher leaders who can support, nurture, and implement a successful change within the school setting. Teachers need to acquire a thorough understanding of the need for change and a yearning to make the changes. Unless teachers have ownership of the problem, solutions cannot be implemented and change will not occur.

A radical reform in the traditional model of professional development is being delivered through the implementation of professional learning communities. The opportunities and exposure to an entirely different way of growing as a professional can be acquired through participation in a professional learning community. However, teachers must believe that their participation in a professional learning community is beneficial. Without their commitment to the process, all is done in vain. If teachers do not have

ownership and empowerment in the process of change, substantive change will not occur. Therefore, the ultimate question that remained was, "Do teachers feel that professional learning communities provide opportunities for professional growth."

Understanding the critical role that teachers play in determining the effectiveness and success of a program is a vital part of understanding the value of a professional learning community. However, current research is limited in how teachers perceived professional learning communities as opportunities to grow professionally.

There is significant research (Dufour, 2007; Hord, 1997b; InPraxis Group, 2006) about the structure, the characteristics, the implementation, and the school level benefits of professional learning communities. The research also implies the benefits that a professional learning community will provide for teacher, administrators and students (Louis & Marks, 1998; Schmoker, 2005; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Within the past few years, research has also been conducted with regard to the principal's role in creating a professional learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). However, there is limited research reflects the teacher's voice in this process of change involved in the implementation of professional learning communities. Does the professional learning community, according to the perceptions of the teacher, promote opportunities for professional growth? As the research indicates, without the teacher's support in the equation, lasting change and the implementation of a professional learning community will be void.

To comprehend the significance of a professional learning community, it is essential to establish a framework for understanding the multiple facets of professional development. A workable outline included, 1) the historical perspective of the urgency of professional

development, 2) the barriers to professional development, 3) the traditional structures of professional development were explored.

Historical Perspective of Professional Development as Related to Reform Efforts

The call for school reform to improve student learning has been at the forefront of the American education system for more than two decades (Hirsh, Koppich, & Knap, 2000). Only within the last decade has the center for reform been grounded in improving the practice of teaching.

During the early eighties, educational reform revolved around creating demanding standards and new curricula for academic requirements for students. The primary focus of this reform effort was to create more rigorous standards so that the level of "what" students were learning was more challenging. However, changes in the way that teaching and learning were occurring was seldom addressed; therefore, teachers continued to use the traditional methods of instruction to teach the more rigorous standards. As a result, the reform efforts promoted diminutive change in the American education system (Hirsh, Koppich, & Knap, 2000).

The lack of improved student achievement that resulted from the first reform initiated a push to improve teaching by engaging teachers in the process of decision-making. During the second reform, teachers were allowed opportunities to engage in the practice of site-based management. Many states also increased teachers' salaries and implemented a career ladder process to entice teachers to improve their performance. This initiative did not produce the needed improvement in student achievement, because once again the art of teaching and learning was disregarded. The failure of the first two reform efforts is best explained by Hord (1997a); "a quick fix mentality, especially prevalent in U.S. culture, resulted in many

schools being poorly prepared for this plan for change and therefore implementing changes in a superficial and less than high quality way" (p. 3).

Initiating the third wave of reform was a report released by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 1996) titled, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. The crucial findings of the report focused on the quality of teaching and revealed, "What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn." Five recommendations for significant school improvement were cited in the report: 1) improve teacher preparation programs and ongoing opportunities for professional learning, 2) intensify efforts in teacher recruitment, 3) recognize teachers' professional knowledge and abilities, 4) raise the standards for teachers and students, 5) restructure schools to support and promote teacher and student success.

On the heels of the NCTAF's (1996) report, the need for school reform was intensified when the realization that many schools were continuing to experience a significant decrease in the level of student achievement. Politicians became alarmed at the overwhelming number of students who were graduating from high school without the basic skills needed to enter the work force (Darling-Hammond, 1996; U. S. Department of Education, 2007). Concerned with the need for change, the federal government and many state governments enacted rigorous mandates that forced schools to change their educational policies. In 2001, the federal government endorsed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The act specifically called for increased accountability, more choices for parents and students, credentialed and certified teachers in every classroom, improved professional development, and an emphasis on reading. As a result of the federal mandates, states employed additional legislative mandates, which include high stakes accountability programs

and specific teacher certification requirements. NCLB has created a greater sense of urgency to engage in the ongoing practice of school reform. This urgency has intensified the focus that was identified in the report released by the NCTAF for the need for a more substantive forum of professional development.

The five recommendations made in the report create a structurally all encompassing foundation for supporting the process of change needed for substantive school improvement. However, as reported in the Rand Change Agent Study (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978) teachers will only embrace change when there are opportunities for participation in decision-making, relevant professional development, long term support structures, and strong leadership. Sergiovanni (1996) also stresses that for change to occur, teacher must be involved in a community of learning, caring, and inquiry. Darling-Hammond (1997) emphasized in her report, *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching,* that "reforms, we have learned over and over again, are rendered effective or ineffective by the knowledge, skills, and commitments of those in schools. Without the know-how and buy-in, innovations do not succeed" (as cited in Sweeney, 2003, p.10). Many researchers have identified that professional development for teachers is critical for successful reform because it is the quality of teaching that promotes change within the educational environment and ultimately impacts student learning.

A concept for ongoing effective professional development began to surface prior to the third wave of reform efforts. During the late eighties, the organizational structure of a professional learning community began to develop with the research conducted by Rosenholtz (1989). Through her study, the correlation between teacher workplaces and teacher quality was identified. The study revealed that teachers who felt supported in their

own continuous learning process and classroom applications were more effective teachers and had a greater impact on student achievement. The support identified in the study was defined as collegial collaboration and cooperation. Fullan's (1991) work also focused on the workplace of teachers. He strongly recommended a "redesign of the workplace so that innovation and improvements are built into the daily activities of teachers" (p. 353).

Rosenhotz's (1989) and Fullan's (1991) works were later supported by the findings from McLaughlin and Talbert's (1993) research, which indicated that when teachers were provided with opportunities for collegial collaboration, they learned from the experience and applied the knowledge gained into their classroom practices. Within this organizational structure, teachers' professional growth was enhanced through continuous collegial support and collaboration.

In Senge's (1990) book, *The Fifth Discipline*, the concept of the learning organization is brought to the forefront of educational change initiatives. Senge defines a learning organization as a structure "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). He emphasizes that learning for teachers should occur on the job site because learning occurs within the context of the setting in which people are taking action. According to Senge, it is within this collective learning environment that the capacity to reflect, evaluate, and grow professionally is enhanced and teachers are provided with the skills and knowledge needed to pursue the overall vision of the organization. Senge's format and support of the learning organization endorses the implementation of the professional learning community within the school setting. This format for organizational structure

creates an environment whereby school reform can occur through the transformation of teachers' professional growth.

Since the 1996 report released by the NCTAF and the introduction of NCLB (2001), the focus has moved towards the need for quality teaching. Improvement in the quality of teaching occurs through effective, ongoing, professional growth. In response to this critical need, the concept of professional learning communities has become a prevalent term in the educational setting. Growing numbers of schools are implementing the framework of a professional learning community as the blueprint for substantive school reform. Professional learning communities are beginning to provide schools with the hope that change and reform of the current educational system is possible.

Significance of Professional Development

Many researchers note that systemic reform is contingent on the professional growth of teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Spillane, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999). In a report released by The Teaching Commission (2004), the case is made "that helping our teachers to succeed and enabling our children to learn is an investment in human potential, one that is essential to guaranteeing America's future freedom and prosperity" (p. 11). For teachers and administrators to adequately respond to the pressures of the accountability models that have been implemented, ongoing effective professional development is imperative. Teachers and administrators should refocus on how teaching and learning occur by becoming a catalyst for teacher change through continuous learning and reflection. Desimone et al. (2002) maintain that "professional development is considered an essential mechanism for deepening teachers' content knowledge and developing their teaching practices" (p. 81). Desimone et al. (2002)

found that "professional development could be a cornerstone of systemic reform efforts designed to increase teachers' capacity to teach to high standards" (p. 81).

Knowledge needed in today's educational arena is continuously changing and expanding. Guskey (1996) aspires that "educators have a professional obligation to keep abreast of the knowledge base in order to be optimally effective" (p. 34). To do so, teachers must have opportunities to enhance their teaching skills on a regular basis (Guskey & Huberman, 1995). They should be granted opportunities for daily reflection, peer review and coaching, collaborative collegial interaction, and ongoing professional dialogue.

Often the current physical structure of the professional educational environment, restricts teachers in their opportunities for continuous improvement. In a study conducted by Garet et al. (2001), it was found that only 23% of the schools observed were practicing effective professional development that would bring forth educational reform. Without improving the quality of the professional growth opportunities, an increase in student achievement will not occur (Guskey, 2006).

Barriers to Professional Development

Even though research provides a strong argument that effective professional development is the key to creating opportunities for substantive school reform, there are many hurdles in the current educational structure that stand in the way. Most teachers spend the majority of their day in isolation from their professional colleagues (Darling-Hammond, 1997). This isolation prevents teachers from gaining new ideas and strategies, which could be obtained by observing and dialoging with other colleagues who are teaching in the same core subject areas. To describe the issue of isolation experienced at the school, Dufour (2007) used an analogy to compare teachers and marathon runners: "teachers are just happy

to finish (the education race) in June. What's missing is that unlike marathon runners who must pass the bar to one another to complete the race, teachers don't need each other. There is no mutual accountability, no interdependency". Dufour challenged schools to abolish isolation by assuming "collective responsibility for building a collaborative culture in education". From interviews conducted for their study, Hemphill and Duffield (2007) quote a teacher who stated that "one of the most powerful components of the staff development teacher professional learning community was the time spent reflecting individually and then with colleagues about learning" (p. 53).

The process of learning requires both enculturation and construction (Borko, 2004). Teacher learning is described by Borko as situative in that learning occurs as a result of the changes experienced through "participation in socially organized activities, and individuals' use of knowledge as an aspect of their own participation in social practices" (p. 4). In most educational structures, teachers are void of the opportunities to participate and dialogue with other professionals. The isolation they experience in the classroom limits the opportunities for enculturation through participation. In fact, recent studies report that the isolation teachers feel in the classroom is overwhelming and is one of the reasons for teacher burnout (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; Rosenberg, O'Shea, & O'Shea, 1998). The continuation of isolation and the lack of opportunities to relate with other professionals ultimately forces teachers into a confined and limited style of teaching. The boundaries of the four classroom walls ultimately serve as a roadblock on the pathway to the expansion of knowledge for teachers therefore preventing educational reform.

Traditional Professional Development

Across the country, school districts are currently spending excessive amounts of money for professional development that is "woefully inadequate" (Borko, 2004, p. 3). Under the traditional professional development model, a select number of teachers attend a wide array of workshops based on their individual interests or possibly the interest of their colleagues. In most cases, data are not used to determine which workshops should be attended in an effort to address the needs of the school.

Traditional professional growth opportunities also typically involve off campus visits that include a one time presentation of a specific instructional strategy (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Most of these presentations include a lecture style format with limited demonstration and minimal opportunity for hands on involvement from the participants (Guskey, 2000). Traditional workshops rarely have follow up sessions that allow teachers the opportunity for implementation, reflection, and evaluation (Garet et al., 2001; Schmoker, 2004). Garet et al. discovered that the duration of most professional development activities was less than one week with the total number of contact hours averaging fifteen per year.

According to Schmoker (2004), traditional professional development opportunities are generic structures that often have no relevance to the needs of the school and do not address the identified curricular needs that will promote growth. Most of the workshop offerings do not take into account the way that teachers learn and grow (Borko, 2004). The lack of continuity, follow through, and evaluation involved in traditional staff development have an insignificant impact on the professional growth of teachers (Schmoker, 2004).

In a study conducted by Darling-Hammond (1996), it was found that only 10% of the strategies learned at "one shot" or "drive through" workshops are ever implemented into the

classroom. Sykes (1996) warns that the current inadequacy of the traditional approach to staff development is "the most serious unsolved issue for policy and practice in America's education today" (p. 465). The type of professional growth and learning that must occur in order to bring forth systemic reform is not resulting from participation in the traditional professional development. Hirsh (2004) avows that "school districts can no longer afford staff development efforts that are predominately 'adult pull-out programs'. That kind of learning alone will not produce high-level results" (p. 3).

Traditional staff development often lacks the structure and foresight needed to adequately develop an adult learning environment. Professional growth and continuous learning opportunities for teachers are not resulting from their participation in the traditional model of professional development. The inconsequential professional growth being provided for teachers cannot and will not promote changes in the educational system that will significantly improve student achievement. Eisner (2001) strongly asserts that

> the center for teacher educator is not the university; it is the school in which the teacher works. Professional growth should be promoted during the 25 years that a teacher works in a school, not just during the year and a half that he or she spends in a teacher educational program. Can we create schools that take the professional development of teachers seriously? (p. 368)

Response to the Professional Development Crisis: Professional Learning Communities

Educators have recognized the overwhelming need to create more effective strategies for implementing opportunities for professional growth. Rasmussen et al. (2004) contend that "in contrast to one-shot, stand alone workshops or professional development relegate to a handful of in-service days, schools with excellent programs make professional development

an ongoing part of educators daily work" (p. 17). Research has shown that effective professional development must provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect, dialogue with colleagues, and evaluate what has been learned in order to be able to successfully implement the newly acquired instructional strategy (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Guskey, 2000).

In complementary studies (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow, & Sebring, 1994; Lee, Smith, & Croniger, 1995; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newman & Wehlage, 1995) it was determined that one of four interconnected key factors that leads to improved student achievement was organizational capacity. As defined by the study, organizational capacity refers to the ability of a staff to work as a team. In reporting the findings of the studies, Hord (1997a) suggests

> the most successful schools functioned as professional communities, where teachers helped one another, took collective responsibility for student learning, and worked continuously to improve their teaching practices. Schools with strong professional communities offered more authentic pedagogy and were more effective in encouraging student achievement. (p.3)

Change in the current practices of providing staff development needs to occur to create effective professional development opportunities that will promote learning for teachers and students. Darling-Hammond stresses that "educators can expect little change in the teaching/learning process unless they pay more attention to the ways in which teachers learn together and do their work" (as cited in Morrissey, Cowan, Leo, & Blair, 1999, p. 8). McLaughlin asserts, "the most promising strategy for sustained substantive school

improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community" (as cited in Schmoker, 2004, p. 424).

As a result of the critical need to create effective strategies that will promote professional growth for teachers and administrators, many schools are striving to create professional learning communities within the educational environment. The framework of a professional learning community combines "Peter Senge's (1990) model of a learning organization with the call for a collaborative culture espoused by such leading educational researchers Michael Fullan, Milbrey McLaughlin, Karen Seashore Louis, Fred Newmann, and Gary Wehlage" (Burnette, 2002, p. 51).

Dufour (2004) asserts that the development of professional learning communities in the educational environment is a critical component for educational reform. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL, 1997) advocates, "As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement" (p. 1). Professional learning communities allow teachers opportunities to connect with other teachers and create a natural environment for professional dialogue. This connection, according to Lieberman (1995), mobilizes teachers and creates a structure of commitment that brings forth changes in the way teachers and administrators participate in the educational setting. As Eisner (2001) suggests, "the deeper problems of schooling have to do with teacher isolation and the fact that teachers don't often have access to other people who know what they're doing when they teach and who can help them do it better" (Flinders & Thorton, 2004, p. 300). The implementation of professional learning communities has comprehensively created a new

framework for professional development by espousing opportunities to connect teachers. Morissey, et al. (1999) maintain that

> staffs who become professional learning communities continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. They examine conditions that have an impact on student results, assist one another in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and techniques, and make informed decisions to increase student learning. Such interactions support improvement of the teacher-student relationship as well as give teachers the courage to try new tactics and provide a way for them to work through problems associated with changes in practice. (p. 11)

Research (Burnett, 2002; Dufour 2004; Hord, 1995) suggests that professional learning communities create a structure for professional development that will ultimately provide teachers and administrators with the needed opportunities for growth, which will promote significant gains in student achievement.

Professional learning communities create a change within the educational environment that dramatically impacts the overall culture of a school. The organizational structure supported by professional learning communities endorses a strong sense of professional collaboration and collegiality, which espouses professional growth. The collective capacity that is created through the collaborative spirit found in a professional learning community supports teachers in a continuous cycle of learning. It is through this model of continuous learning that teachers are empowered to authenticate school reform that will ultimately promote student achievement.

The endorsement of professional learning communities within the school setting substantiates professional growth for teachers and administrators. Carmichael (1982)

powerfully affirms that "teachers are the first learners" (p. 5). The capacity for children to learn is ultimately dependent upon the opportunities for our teachers to learn. Professional learning communities create the forum for this learning. Teachers and administrators who participate in a professional learning community improve the overall effectiveness of the organization by enhancing the capacity for professional growth.

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. A qualitative study was conducted using participant observations, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. Data collection for this study included teachers' responses to the Professional Learning Community Assessment (Oliver, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003), participant observations field notes, focus group interviews and individual interviews transcripts. Data were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Professional Learning Community: An organizational structure that engages a group of professionals in collaborative learning whereby they continuously seek to learn, share, and implement what has been learned within a supportive environment. The overriding goal of a professional learning community is to improve student learning. The attributes of the community include shared values and vision, supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions and shared practice (Hord, 1997a).
2. Professional Study Group: A small group of professionals that focus on an identified topics and goals based on data driven decisions. The overall goal of a professional study group is to positively impact student learning.

3. Collaboration: A systematic process by which a group of people work together, interdependently, towards a common goal, to analyze and impact professional practice in an effort to improve individual and collective results (Dufour, 2004).
4. Professional Development: Opportunities for teachers to learn and develop as professionals in a way that will ultimately impact student achievement (Guskey, 2003).
5. Professional Growth: Engaged continuous collective learning that promotes the individual and positively impacts student learning. (Guskey, 2003)

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

In preparing a critical analysis of the literature that revolves around the concepts of professional learning communities, it is essential to develop a comprehensive understanding of the various elements of professional development. A significant component in addressing professional development is understanding how adults learn, enabling educators to develop strategies that will produce effective professional development. To determine whether or not professional learning communities are adequately responding to the call for change in the traditional structures of professional development, researchers must also understand the attributes of effective professional development. Understanding the foundational structures that support professional development prepares a path for linking effective professional development with professional learning communities. The theoretical framework supporting professional learning communities, the characteristics of effective professional development, and various aspects of professional learning communities are discussed in the following sections.

Theoretical Framework Supporting Professional Learning Communities

Understanding a framework for how learning occurs assists educators in developing more appropriate and effective professional development opportunities that will enhance and transform current educational practices. Joyce (1996) avows, "to engage in teaching well is to embrace the adventure of limitless learning about minds and how ideas and emotions

interact with environments and become transformed" (p. 6). Sergiovanni (1996) stresses "if our aim is to help students become life long learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for our teachers" (p. 152).

Teachers must be granted opportunities to practice the art of reflection to deepen their understanding for the process of learning and teaching. Joyce (1996) maintains that "real learning generates growth in the learners' mind. New concepts change the ways of organizing knowledge and thinking about it, providing new materials for associations and problem solving" (p. 51). The dimensions that support a professional learning community empower teachers to constantly engage in a continual process of learning through professional development. Within this conceptual framework, learning is encouraged through collaboration, common vision, collegiality, professional dialogue, and constant evaluation (Hord, 1997b). Professionally supportive relationships among teachers within their schools construct the capacity for them to coalesce around a shared vision for the meaning of quality education.

According to Louis and Marks (1998), "by engaging in reflective dialogue about teaching and learning, teachers can examine the assumptions basic to quality practice" (p. 539). Through the collaborative, collegial atmosphere that is created with the implementation of a professional learning community, teachers are grounded in the process of reflection and continually making meaning of the art of teaching.

The philosophical foundations of a professional learning environment support the premises of a constructivist model because the overriding principles of the constructivist model suggest that the exercise of learning involves seeking meaning within one's frame of reference and expanding the base of knowledge by comparing it to the concept of other

people (Paul, 2005). Based on the research of Paul, the epistemology of the constructivist perspective defines knowledge as a "dynamic product of the interactive work of the mind made manifest in social practices and institutions" (p. 47). The underlying principles of the constructivist perspectives suggest that teachers must understand their own acquisition of knowledge and the relationship within the social context in order to be effective in the classroom. Therefore, teachers must have the opportunity to reflect and develop a framework for the foundation of knowledge that will be presented to their students. Professional learning communities provide a forum by which the construction of knowledge for teachers can occur through a continuous cycle of learning rooted in reflection, social collegial interaction, and professional dialogue (Hord, 1997a). When the understanding of knowledge is constructed within the framework of a professional learning community, teachers are better equipped to share and make meaning of the acquired knowledge with their students. The understanding of knowledge within the context of a professional learning community is constructed through relevant and meaningful connections within the school setting. As indicated by Joyce (1996), "knowledge cannot be separated from the social process within which it is manufactured" (p. 51). Therefore, when the knowledge of teachers is co-created, expanded, and grounded within the context of the needs of the school, the meaning of that knowledge is greater and has more applicability.

There are various adult learning theories that prescribe how teachers learn, construct, and process the information that is needed to expand their knowledge base. The one most closely aligned with professional learning communities is the socio cultural learning theory. This theoretical concept was examined for the context of this study.

Socio-cultural learning theory defines learners as active constructors of knowledge whereby the foundational structure of knowledge is based on social interaction. Drawing on the works of Wells (2001), "knowledge is constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situations, using cultural resources at their disposal, as they work toward the collaborative achievement of goals that emerge in the course of their activity" (p. 180). Wells goes on to state that this construction of knowledge emerges as participants "are engaged in meaning making with others in an attempt to extend and transform their collective understanding with respect to some aspect of a jointly undertaken activity" (p. 84). Through this process of enculturation, participants are able to develop their own understanding of the information and transform their current practices. The organizational structure of professional learning communities supports the constructions of knowledge through social participation. The very premise of a professional community is dependent upon the acquisition of knowledge through social interaction and professional dialogue.

In an effort to understand learning and development from a cultural and social perspective, socio cultural frameworks can be applied. The theoretical framework for socio-cultural learning theory is grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's work stems from the interdependence between the social and individual processes of learning. Through Vygotsky's work, the idea of scaffolding was identified. The term scaffolding implies that people learn at a much higher level when support for their learning gap is provided through peer interaction. This collaborative support enables the learner to process the information in the social environment and obtain the information at an individual level later. An essential element for success when using the collaborative process of learning is active participation.

All participants must be actively engaged in the process of learning so that they will be able to construct their own understanding of the information presented (Vygotsky, 1978).

The premise of professional learning communities resides within the constructs of the socio-cultural framework. The professional development and growth of teachers is dependent upon the social engagement that occurs within the school setting. The collaborative and collegial spirit is the foundation that promotes the continuous cycle of learning for teachers. Learning within this context of professional interactions, the knowledge base for teachers is expanded and constantly changing.

The structural framework for a professional learning community answers the need for ongoing professional growth. Through understanding and application of learning theories, more sound and sustainable professional development opportunities can be designed. The changes that are needed to support educational reform will require support and guidance for our teachers through effective professional development.

Effective Professional Development

Effective professional development has been described as professional growth opportunities that truly have an impact on teacher learning and ultimately enhance student achievement (Desimone et al., 2002; Guskey, 2003; Sparks, 2004). Since the early 1990's, there have been multiple studies to determine what effective professional development looks like (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Wilson & Berne, 1999). The purpose of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) is to provide continuous research on best practices for professional development.

Rasmussen et al. (2004) suggest that "effective professional development is coherent, research based, and capacity building" (p. 19). A professional consensus of the overall

characteristics of effective professional development is described by Desimone et al. (2002) as being focused on "how students learn content; in-depth, active learning opportunities; links to high standards, opportunities for teachers to engage in leadership roles; extended duration; and the collective participation of groups of teachers from the same school, grade, or departments" (p. 82). This consensus was formed based on the results of a three-year longitudinal study with 30 schools and 207 teachers.

According to Guskey (2000), for professional development to be deemed as effective, it must first have a significant impact on student learning. Teachers must be at the forefront to receive and implement the strategies that are introduced through effective staff development. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggest that researchers agree that teachers learn best when they are involved in activities that specifically focus on instruction and student learning within identified school settings. According to Hord (1997a), when professional development addresses the needs of the school that are identified through data, the learning has a greater impact. McLaughlin and Talbert also stress that effective staff development should be a continuous process that constantly involves an element of reflection and evaluation. Through collaboration with colleagues, teachers should be provided with the opportunities to process and construct a theoretical understanding of their skills and knowledge through a continuous cycle of inquiry and improvement. Teachers are then empowered to share and act on their learning.

Effective professional development is diversified and revolves around the issues that are relevant to a school's population (Sparks, 2004). The framework for effective professional development must be based on the identified needs of the students, staff, and the culture of a particular school. Therefore, appropriate professional development needs will

result from analysis and synthesis of all available data (Guskey, 2003). According to Sargent (2001), there are four categories of data that will assist in determining the overall needs of the representative student population, including student achievement, demographics, program, and perception data. Teachers and administrators must take an active role in the process of analysis and in determining the needs of the school. The identified needs should be the driving force for the types of professional development opportunities that teachers and administrators seek (Rasmussen et al., 2004).

The implementation and sustainability of strategies learned through effective staff development are based on a continuous and ongoing process of reflective learning. From a large-scale empirical comparison study conducted by Garet et al. (2001) using a national probability sample, three characteristics of effective professional development surfaced. According to the study, effective professional development must focus on content knowledge, engage teachers in the learning process, and be coherent with other learning opportunities. The study revealed that teachers and administrators must be involved in a process of learning and change to effectively implement innovative instructional strategies that will enhance the students' opportunities for learning.

An essential element of this process is the opportunity for teachers to reflect and participate in professional dialogue with their colleagues (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Professional dialogue provides opportunity for feedback and assistance in the implementation of new ideas. Guskey (2003) incorporates the idea that effective professional development requires that "teachers work together, reflect on their practice, exchange ideas, and share strategies" (p. 749).

Along with the opportunity for professional, collaborative dialogue and reflective evaluation, effective professional development must also be coupled with facilitative coaching and peer observation (Louis & Marks, 1998). Coaching and peer observations afford teachers the opportunities to gain constructive insight from their colleagues about specific instructional practices. Teachers involved in this practice of professional development are "engaged in focused recurring cycles of instruction, assessment, and adjustment of instruction" (Joyce & Showers, as cited in Schmoker, 2004, p. 430).

Hirsh (2004) asserts that "professional development must be results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded" (p. 4). The term "job embedded" is characterized by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) as schools where goals are continuously aligned and monitored to support the needs that have been identified through the disaggregation of data. Ongoing reviews of the data enable teachers to evaluate progress and design appropriate professional development opportunities to meet the desired goals. Hirsh (2004) avows that effective "professional development focuses on deepening educators' content knowledge, by applying research-based strategies to help students meet rigorous standards, and using a variety of classroom assessments" (p. 22). Darling-Hammond (1996) asserts "the most effective staff development is curriculum based, sustained over time, linked to concrete problems of practice and built into teachers' ongoing work with their colleagues" (p. 8).

Professional Learning Communities

In response to the cry for more effective professional development, schools have begun investigating various strategies for implementing professional growth opportunities.

One concept that has provided school with a road map for creating opportunities for effective professional development has been the implementation of professional learning communities.

During the early 1990's, many schools began the process of reform by developing professional learning communities within the school environment (Hord, 1995). Burnette (2002) defines a professional learning community as:

> A school where people are united by a common purpose, shared vision, collective commitments, and specific, measurable goals; where collaborative teams engage in action research and collective inquiry into the big questions of teaching and learning; where continuous improvement cycles are built into the routine practices of the school and where gathering evidence of student learning is a constant focus. (p. 52)

This systemic structure for professional development creates a continuous learning environment for teachers and administrators with the primary objective aimed towards student achievement. In a case study of Cottonwood Creek School, conducted by a research team from Southwest Educational Development Lab (SEDL) (1998), it was found that "the factors that make it possible for students to grow and develop (provision of stimulating and relevant material, processing the material in a social context, feedback on performance, support and encouragement, etc.) are the same that enable professional staff to grow and develop" (p. 7). These characteristics found at Cottonwood have enhanced the professional growth of teachers. During this study, the team conducted more than 30 interviews of various stakeholders within the school environment. The interviews also revealed that the staff was continuously engaged in reflection, assessment, evaluation, study and learning.

Professional learning communities focus on the specific issues and needs that are relevant to the school. These issues are discovered through a methodical analysis of all

available sources of data. Learning communities allow teachers and administrators to make collaborative data driven decisions that will promote positive and lasting change in regards to their school's identified areas of concern. Dufour, Eaker, and Dufour (2005) argue, "the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (p. 36). Professional learning communities break down the walls that create the isolation and provide teachers with the opportunities to reflect, evaluate, and improve their teaching practices through professional collaboration (Hord, 1997a).

Dufour (2004) emphasizes that in professional learning communities, teachers work in teams, "engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions and promote deep team learning" (p. 9). Collaboration assists in the cultivation of professional confidence and nurtures the translation of new ideas to practice (Strahan, 2003). The confidence that emerges encourages teachers to interact with the educational environment more assertively and allows a safety net that upholds a high level of risk taking (Harris, 2002). These safety nets support the use of innovative research based practices that promotes appropriate learning environments for all children (Andrews & Lewis, 2002).

A collaborative community of professional learners promotes a significant change in the mindset of teachers. The priorities of their mission as teachers, changes from the concept of teaching to the concept of learning. Teaching is no longer the primary focus, it is learning. Dufour (2004) notes that teachers of a professional learning communities focus on the question, "How will we know when each student has learned?" (p. 9). The objectives of the professional learning community center around researching strategies that will meet the needs of the individual child. This community of learners also discusses opportunities for

assessment and evaluation as an avenue for determining individual student success. When instructional strategies are not successful, the team, not the individual teacher, works together to research ideas that could bring about success for the students served (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The systematic process that evolves from the creation of professional learning communities affords teachers and administrators the time to understand problems and investigate potential solutions. Schools organized in this way see problems as opportunities to learn and not as barriers that are difficult to overcome (Hord, 1997b; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Teachers who are committed to working together find solutions that ensure that all children learn (Dufour, 2004).

Collaborative environments focus on the "relationships and connections among individuals" (Harris, 2002, p. 22). The connections that are revealed promote a more nurturing and compassionate environment. Harris goes on to explicate that collaborative environments are "separated from person, role, and status reflecting instead the dynamic created out of shared purpose and being part of a school community" (p. 22). This ownership sparks a desire and commitment for implementing change that potentially contributes to success. Louis and Kruse (1998) argue that "change and improvement occurs because the individuals and the groups inside the school are able to acquire, analyze, understand and plan around information that arises from the environment and from internal monitoring" (p. 18).

To create professional learning community, teams must be afforded the opportunities to meet on a regular basis. The NSDC recommends that teams meet at least once, but preferably several times a week (Hirsh, 2004). Meeting on a regular basis develops a sense of ownership of the problems that are discussed and ultimately creates opportunities for

collegiality and collaboration. Because the meetings focus on the purpose of learning with joint lesson planning and problem solving, an atmosphere of professional learning begins to form. According to Roy and Hord (2003), professional learning communities also "operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation that engage their members in improving daily work to advance the achievement of school goals for student learning" (p. 13).

Products of Professional Learning Communities

The overall positive results of the creation of professional learning communities are numerous. Teachers no longer experience the frustration of isolation. The walls of their classrooms are extended beyond the walls of the school and unlimited doors of learning are unlocked. According to a report from SEDL (1997), teachers also experience a heightened commitment to the goals for the school and develop collective responsibility for students' success. Teachers develop a more informed understanding of the "powerful learning that defines good teaching" (p. 6). The NSDC (2005) conducted research in five states that focused on the professional development practices. Researchers found that teachers involved in professional learning communities experienced "powerful opportunities for shared leadership and learning such as working together on developing the state learning standards, the state strategic planning initiative, the state math initiatives, and professional development projects" (p. 32).

Researchers at SEDL (1997) also found that teachers involved in professional learning communities are "professionally renewed and inspired to inspire students" (p. 6). Because of the renewed spirit, morale in professional learning community schools is

significantly higher. Teachers develop a strong sense of ownership and become committed to providing the best educational experiences for all children.

School Improvement through Professional Learning Communities

School improvement is marked by the opportunities for constant interchange of professional information within the school environment (Harris, 2002). During a three-year case study conducted by Strahan (2003), a team of researchers compared previous data collected from a case study analysis with data collected from new interviews and meeting and classroom observations. The schools involved in the study had improved their achievement on state achievement test from less than 50% to more than 75%. The data gathered from the case study revealed that the success of three schools was attributed to the development of professional learning communities. The professional learning communities created at the identified schools were enhanced by a supportive, nurturing culture that encouraged participants to "coordinate efforts to improve instruction" (p. 127). Based on the findings of Strahan's research, this type of educational culture is embedded with "data driven dialogue, purposeful conversations, guided by formal assessment and informal observations that connected the ways adults and students cared for each other and that provided energy to sustain their efforts" (p. 127).

Dimensions and Attributes of Professional Learning Communities

For an organization to be established as a professional learning community, specific characteristics must be prevalent. From an extensive review of literature conducted by Hord (1997a), the critical characteristics and attributes of a professional learning community were identified and organized into five dimensions which include supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning,

supportive conditions, and shared practice. Each dimension works collaboratively to create a connected community.

Supportive and shared leadership requires that all stakeholders are empowered by administrators to make decisions that affect the community (Hord, 1995). Huffman and Hipp (2003) surmised that "school administrators participate democratically with teachers by sharing power and authority, inviting input into decision making, and promoting and nurturing leadership among staff" (p. 29). Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, and Olivier (2008) conducted a five year qualitative case study of two schools identified as professional learning communities. Individual interviews, small group interviews and surveys findings revealed that teachers felt empowered, professionally engaged, and challenged by being a part their professional learning community.

Administrators involved in professional learning communities teach and model effective decision making skills and then provide opportunities for the stakeholders to share in the process of determining needs and solutions for the opportunities that are unveiled. Kleine-Kracht (1993) contends that "the traditional pattern that teachers teach, students learn and administrators manage is completely altered. [There is] no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (p. 393). In this community spirited environment everyone works collaboratively towards creating the best learning environment for students, parents, and staff. As indicated by Huffman and Hipp (2003), in a professional learning community "principals let go of power and nurture the human side and expertise of the entire school community" (p. 38). The administrator plays the role of facilitator and demonstrates an ability to create a structure that promotes participatory decision-making among all represented groups within the organization. In a

participatory decisions making structure, leadership is viewed as pervasive because all stakeholders share in the responsibility of determining what is best for the students being served (Hipp & Huffman, 2002).

Professional learning communities are founded on a strong foundation that is built on shared values and vision (Dufour et al., 2005; Hord, 1997b; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; Louis & Marks, 1998). Decisions are determined by the organization's drive towards meeting the vision. The overriding vision of a professional learning community is always improved student learning (Dufour et al., 2005). Huffman and Jacobson (2003) urge that "all stakeholders are involved in joint planning action and assessment for student growth and school improvement" (p. 240). The collaborative vision is used as a guiding force in creating an appropriate learning environment. Administrators must have the capacity to develop and unite the stakeholders under the umbrella of a shared vision (Hipp & Huffman, 2002). The continuous work towards the vision promotes an unwavering commitment and the participants of a professional learning community become advocates for student success and academic achievement (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Because stakeholders are driven by a united force towards achieving a shared vision, they work collectively to learn strategies that will create an optimum learning environment (Hord, 1995). Huffman and Jacobson (2003) assert that "people at all levels collectively and continually enhance their capacity to create things they really want to create" (p. 241). Members of a professional learning community strive to increase their basis of knowledge in order to meet the identified needs of their students (Dufour et al., 2005). Hord (1995) recognized that "such collaborative work is grounded in reflective dialogue or inquiry, where staff members conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying

related issues and problems" (p. 9). Staff members work collaboratively to develop strategies that will address specific identified problems. In order to work towards addressing the problems, the implementation of innovative strategies is conducted in a risk free environment that is supported through collegial collaboration (Louis & Marks, 1998).

Success of the strategies is determined by an evaluation of student growth and achievement. Analysis and disaggregation of all available data confirms the rate of success and provides valuable feedback in the process of evaluation (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Collaboratively and collectively, teachers engage in reflective dialogue about the data in an effort to enhance, modify and change the instructional program. The researchers at SEDL (2000) expound, "Together they (teachers) seek new knowledge and skills as well as ways to apply their new learning to their work. This collegial relationship produces creative and satisfactory solutions to problems" (p. 8).

In a collegial relationship, everyone has a responsibility to share their personal practices and to provide support for their peers. Shared personal practice is a critical attribute of a professional learning community because it provides colleagues with the opportunities to obtain support, feedback, and constructive criticism from their peers in a risk free environment (Hord, 1995). Sergiovanni stresses, "this means that teachers work diligently, practice in exemplary ways, keep abreast of new ideas, and help other members of the learning community be successful"(as cited in Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. 51). Within the framework of shared personal practice, peer observations are conducted as a strategy for offering suggestions, knowledge, and encouragement (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Peer observations also allow colleagues the opportunity to share ideas and strategies that may assist in addressing identified problems. Louis and Marks (1998) urge that the

experience of peer observations creates a natural coaching and mentoring relationship between colleagues. Peers form strong bonds and trusting relationships that encourage and promote teachers to try strategies and suggestions that are offered by their colleague. From Louis and Marks' perspective, "peer coaching, teamed teaching, and structured classroom observations entail deprivatized practice to improve pedagogy and collegial relationships" (p. 539).

Professional growth for teachers is a direct result of shared personal practice because of the continuous sharing of knowledge that occurs between colleagues. For teachers to develop and continuously grow as professionals, they must be in a working environment that values and supports hard work towards the promotion of growth through opportunities for challenging tasks and risk taking (Hord, 1995). Within this collaborative, trusting environment, teachers are encouraged to dialogue, debate, and share knowledge that will support the creation of a successful learning environment for student achievement. Kouzes and Posner (1996) advocate, "collaboration is the route to high performance" (p. 106).

To establish an environment that promotes continuous sharing between colleagues, supportive conditions must be established and sustained (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Hord, 1997a; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). These conditions include structures and collegial relationships (Hord, 1995). Supporting structures of a professional learning community means establishing guidelines and procedures that will provide time, physical space, physical proximity, and opportunities for communication (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Based on the dimensions provided by Hord (1997a), it is imperative for the sustainability of a professional teaching community, that time to meet as a whole faculty and as small focus groups on a regular basis is established. The time to meet should be set aside

during the educators' professional day (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Scheduling blocks of common planning time for grade levels and departments is also a critical element of meeting the needs of the structure of a professional learning community. Teachers must have the opportunity to plan with their colleagues. For many systems, this has required restructuring the school day, alternative scheduling strategies, grants, and/or the use of substitutes in the classroom (Hipp & Huffman, 2002).

Space to meet within the school building must also be available. The space should be conducive to team planning and collaboration. Appropriate equipment should be available for teachers as they plan and work collaboratively on developing an instructional program that will promote student achievement. Consideration of the physical layout of the facilities should be considered. Grade levels or departments should be within close proximity of one another (Hord, 1997a). This encourages the coaching and mentoring that is essential for shared personal experiences (Louis & Marks, 1998). Accessibility to a variety of communication devices such as email, telephones, and intercom systems will also promote opportunities for collaboration (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

To establish supportive conditions for a professional learning community, collegial relationships should also be established. In a study conducted by Thompson, Gregg, and Niska (2004), it was revealed by all of the principals interviewed that collegial relationships and trust were essential in creating a learning community. During a two year project, titled *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, conducted by SEDL (2000), it was found that "the collegial relationships include respect, trust, norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, and positive caring relationships among students, teachers, and administrators" (p. 10). To create an open, collaborative environment, all stakeholders

need to feel a sense of security that is established by creating mutual trust and respect. For the creation of this type of environment, people must be afforded the opportunities to develop personal and professional relationships. During interviews conducted by Huffman and Hipp (2003), teachers reiterated the importance of trusting relationships. One teacher stated,

> my fellow teachers support me the most. If I'm not sure about something I know, then I can go to those teachers. I can trust them to give me the right information and guide me as to how to get further information. (p. 59)

Trusting relationships with administrators are also crucial in a professional learning community. Teachers must know that administrators are open, approachable, and trustworthy. Relationships must be nurtured and sustained through constant communication. Opening the lines of communication affords the opportunities to build trusting relationships that will initiate professional dialogue and reflective practices (Louis & Marks, 1998).

Conclusion

Multiple possible research questions arose after synthesizing the current literature on professional learning communities. The current literature does an extensive job in discussing the attributes and role of professional learning communities, the benefits, and the design. Despite the tremendous amount of theoretical research that has been conducted in the field of effective professional development and professional learning communities, there is limited research found implicating teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of professional learning communities as a tool for promoting professional growth. Therefore, research that provides insights about teacher perceptions of professional communities should be a valuable addition to the education knowledge base. This study investigates teachers' perspectives on

professional learning communities as a part of the key to creating schools that can meet the ongoing need for professional growth of our teaching population.

Chapter 3 - Research Design

Qualitative Approach

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. There is supporting research for professional learning communities in the areas of implementation, benefits, principals' roles, sustainability, and attributes. However, research that delves into understanding how teachers perceive professional learning communities as a structure for professional growth is very limited.

With the intention of gaining an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive the use of professional learning communities as a structure for promoting professional growth, it was important to utilize a research design that warranted opportunities to observe and interview teachers who were currently involved in a professional learning community. To meet the proposed criteria and sufficiently address the research question, a qualitative case study involving the use of focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observations was designed. The use of multiple sources of data collection enabled the researcher to triangulate the interpretations of the study generated.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for a study is created in how the "researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework that specifies a set of questions that he or she then examines

in specific ways" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 30). Eisenhart (1991) agrees that a conceptual framework is often comprised of multiple theories that serve as the construct for the collection of data, analysis, and the interpretation of the findings. In light of this definition, the researcher considered various perspectives in an attempt to explore the teachers' perspectives of the professional learning community as opportunities for professional growth. Accordingly, it is purposeful to first discuss and analyze the theoretical framework that informed the method from which the research question was investigated.

The epistemology for this study was grounded in the social constructivist perspective. The social constructivist tradition revolves around the premise of a community of learners in regards to the acquisition of knowledge (Moll, 1990). The foundation of a professional learning community is dependent upon knowledge that is socially constructed from the active involvement of the participants within the community based setting. Social constructivists contend that learning does not occur in isolation. Moll suggests that the emphasis of learning within the context of social constructivism is placed within the social nature of learning. Social constructivists focus on comprehending the meaning of the presented information that is derived from within the context of a collective setting. The premise that supports professional learning communities is that participants learn and construct meaning from their active engagement in the community of learners. Therefore, the theoretical framework for a professional learning community is supported in the social constructivist theory. Participants of the professional learning community acquire knowledge within a specific social setting and in turn construct their own understanding and perceptions. This study required the researcher to design a study that would examine the constructs which are created and why they were created in regards to professional development.

The qualitative approach for this study was approached from the phenomenological point of view. Bogdan and Biken (2007) indicate, "researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular settings" (p. 25). The research construct that supports the phenomenological view is that it is the participant perspective of the situation. "Thus reality comes to be understood to human beings only in the form in which it is perceived" (p. 26). The basic intent of this study was to reveal the participant perspectives of a professional learning community as it relates to professional development. Therefore, perceptions of the situation served as the overriding foundation for the data that was collected and analyzed. It was imperative to investigate and examine in-depth the perceptions of the teachers as it related to professional growth linked to professional learning communities.

Because teachers' perceptions were the focal point of the data collection, the research design had to be flexible enough to allow for emerging themes and concepts that evolved through the process of collection, analysis, and interpretation of data from the studied phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define,

> Grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (p. 23)

The use of grounded theory presented a flexible framework that allowed for the theory to be developed as emerging themes surfaced.

Design

DeMarrais and Lapan (2004) clearly state that "research is a series of negotiated acts, dependent upon language that results in shared knowledge" (p. 89). The focus of this study was contingent upon the willingness and openness of the participants to share their beliefs and thoughts as they pertained to professional learning communities. Therefore, multiple opportunities and different settings were provided for the participants to develop a level of comfort that espoused a willingness to share their honest perceptions.

Because the intent of this study was to gather data that provided an in-depth look into teachers' perceptions, it was important to use multiple data sources. For the purpose of this study, focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observations were used to collect data. As Morgan (1997) states, "in these combined uses of qualitative methods, the goal is to use each method so that it contributes something unique to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon" (p.3). The information obtained through the various forms of qualitative research created a partnership that expanded the richness of the data. It was through the expanded understanding that the perceptions of the participants were appropriately captured.

Because only one school was used in the study, the framework for the study fell into a case study design format. Case study design is utilized when detailed data are collected from a particular participant, setting, or small group. Researchers using this design focus on exploration and description of the occurring phenomenon within the identified setting.

> Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information, rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few examples of the phenomenon in question. (Patton, 1990, p. 26)

The use of one school to collect, analyze and interpret teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth allowed for the development of an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Setting for the Study

Research for this study was conducted in an elementary school that has operated as a professional learning community for five years. Opportunities for collaboration at this school occur during weekly grade level meetings, monthly vertical alignment meetings, and during monthly book study discussions. The school also meets as a team once a month to share research based strategies that have proven to be successful in the classroom. Student data is reviewed during the weekly collaborative planning sessions and specific areas are identified. Based on the identification of need, goals are determined and strategies developed to address areas of concern.

To validate the findings of this research study, the chosen site met the identified criteria of a professional learning community. For validation of the site's appropriateness, it was critical to use an instrument that would assist in determining the level at which the organization operated as a professional learning community. In response to early studies that were conducted, Oliver, Hipp, and Huffman (2003) designed a Likert scale assessment, Professional Learning Communities Assessment (PLCA) (Appendix A) that could be used to determine whether or not schools adhere to the five identifying attributes of a professional learning community. These attributes include: 1) supportive and shared leadership, 2) shared values and vision, 3) supportive conditions, 4) collective learning and application, 5) shared personal practice. The PLCA's reliability was tested by Oliver, Hipp, and Huffman (2003) using the Cronach's Coefficient Alpha and was determined to maintain a high level of

internal consistency with a coefficient span from .83 to .93. This instrument has been validated with contributions from various researchers and experts in the field and study of professional learning communities. Authors of the instrument granted permission for future researchers to use the PLCA in their book titled, *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities* (2003, p. 74). The use of the PLCA validated the school's appropriateness for the study. A random selection of teachers within the selected school sites filled out the identifying assessment prior to the start of the data collection process.

The site selected for the study was Augustus Elementary School (pseudonym), located in the western region of North Carolina. Entry to the school was gained after the researcher contacted the superintendent of the district. The superintendent contacted the principal of the school and acknowledged the appropriateness and importance of the study. The school serves approximately 490 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. More than 92% of the population is Caucasian, 1% is Hispanic, 4% multiracial, 2% Asian, and 1% African American. The socio economic population of the school is representative of lower to middle class students and currently has a free and reduced lunch population of 34%. The school was identified as a School of Distinction and made high growth on the North Carolina End of Grade Test with an 86% percent of the students performing on or above grade level. Table 1 describes the overall student performance for the 2009 year for each of the Adequately Yearly Progress subgroups as reported for the school on the 2009 North Carolina Report Card.

Table 1

Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End of Grade Test: Percentage of Students, Groups by Gender, Ethnicity, and Other Factors, Who Passed Both the Reading and Math Tests (North Carolina Report Card, 2009)

	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian Pacific Islander	Multi Racial	Econ. Disadv	Not Econ. Disadv	Limited English Prof.	Students with Disabilities
School	81.7%	81.1%	82.3%	N/A	N/A	80%	N/A	59%	92.7%	50%	51.4%
# Of tests taken	120	127	226	N/A	N/A	10	5	83	164	6	37
District	64%	70.1%	69.40%	46.8%	49%	56.1%	63.5%	55.4%	76.9%	35.4%	33.4%
State	61.5%	66.4%	76.70%	43.6%	48.9%	76.5%	65.5%	48.3%	78.4%	34.6%	32.3%

The average tenure of a teacher serving in this school is approximately 15 years. The school's teacher turn over rate is very low reporting at 0% for 2009. Table 2 describes the teacher quality report as indicated by the 2009 North Carolina's Report Card.

Table 2

North Carolina Report Card: Quality Teacher Report (North Carolina Report Card, 2009)

	Total Number of Classroom Teachers	Fully Licensed Teachers	Classes Taught by Highly Qualified Teachers	Teachers with Advanced Degrees	Nationally Board Certified Teachers	Teacher Turnover Rate	Teaching Experience		
							0-3 years	4-10 years	10+ years
Our School	30	100%	100%	30%	7	0%	17%	33%	50%
District	24	100%	100%	20%	5	5%	16%	41%	44%
State	37	98%	100%	27%	5	12%	23%	30%	47%

This school was identified as a professional learning community by the state of North Carolina in a recent pilot study that was conducted by the McRel group (2008), with regard to principals' evaluation tools. The school's principal has presented at multiple conferences on the structure and implementation of a professional learning community within the school setting.

At the time of the study, Augustus Elementary School had been operating as a professional learning community for more than five years. The school started the implementation of a professional learning community with the introduction of book studies in 2001. The process of implementation of all attributes of a professional learning community was achieved in 2004. Since the onset, the school has moved towards a more collaborative spirit and now functions with all of the attributes identified in the research. However, to validate that all attributes of a professional learning community were accomplished, the Professional Learning Community Assessment was administered.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, participants were selected based on their years of involvement in a professional learning community and were randomly chosen from the identified school and subgroups within the school. Fourteen participants, representing 47% of the school's population, were selected to complete the PLCA. The eleven focus group participants were selected from the initial group involved in completing the survey. From the focus group participants, seven were asked to participate in the individual interviews. Selection of the participants for the interviews was based on the development of a group that was representative of the school's population. All selected participants clearly demonstrated the qualities and attributes of a practicing and active member of a professional learning community. The participants chosen for the study had been active members of a professional learning community for a minimum of three years. Selection of participants was based on the years of experience in the field of education and the grade levels that they were currently teaching. The levels of experiences ranged from 3 years to 27 years. Having various levels of years of service within the educational environment provided a wide range of perceptions

in regards to professional development and professional learning communities. The principal of the selected site assisted in creating the pool of teachers who were eligible to participate in the study. From the eligible pool, teachers were then selected randomly. A letter describing the study and indicating the purpose of the research was sent to all selected participants (Appendix B). Attached to the letter was a consent form indicating the participants' willingness to be involved in the study (Appendix C). The Institutional Review Board of Appalachian State University preapproved the process of participant selection and participant involvement.

Methods of Data Collections

Focus groups were used at the onset of the research for data collection with the selected participants. Litoselliti (2003) defines focus groups as being "small structured groups with selected participants, normally led by a moderator" (p. 1). Focus groups are used in an effort to explore identified topics and gain insight to participants' views and experiences through the group interaction. Morgan (1997) urges that focus groups create the "ability to collect a concentrated set of interaction in a very short span of time" (p. 9).

The use of focus groups was appropriate for the initial contact because it created a forum of openness that grant teachers "permission" to share their insight into professional learning communities in a focused setting. Teachers typically revel in the opportunity to gather and discuss educational issues with their colleagues. The focus group created a non-threatening setting that promoted the opportunity for the teachers to share their perceptions in an unbiased atmosphere. According to Morgan (1997), focus groups create the "ability to reveal socially constructed meaning and underlying attitudes" (p. 89). In the focus group environment, the teachers shared their experiences as participants and their perceptions of a

professional learning community as it related to professional growth. Merton, Fiskes, and Kendall (1990) stress that an effective focus group "fosters interaction that explores the participants' feelings in some depth, and takes into account the personal context that participants use in generating their response to the topic" (p. 45).

Two focus group sessions were conducted at the selected school site. As recommended by Morgan (1997), each focus group consisted of no more than ten participants. For this study, six participants were selected for group 1, and all six were able to participant. Focus group 2 consisted of five participants. Six were invited to participate; however one participant was sick on the day of the focus group session. Both sessions lasted approximately 1½ hours in length. The researcher coordinated with the school's principal to determine the appropriate and comfortable setting in the building. Prior to the start of each focus group, guidelines (Appendix D) were established by the researcher/ moderator.

Questions for the study (Appendix D) were designed to focus the discussion on professional growth as a result of participation in a professional learning community. Because it was important to gain in-depth information, eight questions were developed for the focus group interaction.

All focus group settings were recorded by dual audio equipment. The recordings were then submitted to an outside party who transcribed all of the recorded conversations. I served as the moderator for the group because it was important for me to observe participants, ask probing questions and listen intently to the conversations and discussions. This level of involvement allowed me opportunities to adequately probe after the initial questions were discussed. Because teachers are often cautious about revealing their "true" feelings to administrators, I only identified myself as a doctoral student.

During the focus group interviews, an unbiased assistant moderator, Dr. Amy DeCaron, took notes and recorded general observations of the groups. The assistant selected for the study has her doctorate from the University of Tennessee in Industrial Psychology. Dr. DeCaron submitted an analysis of the focus group interviews, which was used as a part of the triangulation of the data. Dr. DeCaron had no previous knowledge of professional learning communities and all of her experiences pertained to the field of business. Her analysis of the focus group data provided another perspective so that the responses of the participants were interpreted accurately.

Upon completion of the focus groups, seven participants were invited to participate in individual interviews. Interviewing is described by Kahn and Cannell (1957) as a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 149). Individual interviews provided additional insight into the participants' perceptions of professional learning communities. Questions designed for the individual interviews (Appendix E) were used only as a guide and were open ended. The open-ended question format allowed the participants opportunities to "answer from their own frames of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 3). Marshall and Rossman indicate that, "the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participants views it (the emic perspective), not as the researchers views it (the etic perspective)" (p. 101). The intent of the individual interviews was to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions revealed in the focus groups interactions.

The participants for the individual interviews were representative of the school's population. This representation was based upon the teachers' years of experience, current

grade level position, and years of involvement in a professional learning community. The researcher recorded the interviews and had an outside party transcribe.

During the process of conducting individual interviews and the completion of the focus groups, the researcher conducted observations of the participants interacting in their professional learning communities. Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicate that participant observation allows researchers to "discover complex interactions in natural social settings" (p. 99). Opportunities for participant observations included book studies, collaborative vertical grade level planning sessions, and professional research study groups. The researcher recorded the observation using field notes and audio recordings. During these observations, the researcher's role was one of "complete observer." As described by Spradley (1980), the role of a "complete observer" assumes a passive stance whereby the researcher is uninvolved and detached from the experiences and passively records behaviors and observations from a distance. During these observations, the researcher sought to develop an understanding of the participants' roles, interactions, practices, engagement, and the level of professional dialogue and content that evolved as a result of the opportunity.

After collecting information through focus group studies, individual interviews and observations, all data were analyzed though coding techniques. Because I ultimately served as the researcher and moderator, it was important that I analyze the data. As Litoselliti (2003) explains, conducting your own analysis provides you with the advantages of having greater "insight and in-context knowledge about the research overall, and so being able to establish a variety of important links between the research questions/ aims and the data gathered" (p. 85).

Data Analysis & Management

With the use of grounded theory, the process of analysis began with the first opportunity of data collection. To ensure the reliability and validity of the process of data analysis, a systematic process for analysis of the data was started with the generation of categories and themes. All concepts that emerged at the beginning of the process were considered provisional categories.

Recordings of the interviews were listened to numerous times and themes that emerged from every interview were listed. Transcribed notes were read and reread multiple times and reoccurring themes were documented. Reading transcriptions of the interviews and listening to the recording assisting in assuring accuracy of the language captured in the transcribed notes. The participants' voice inflections and tones helped capture the meanings of the phases and words used by the participants to describe their perceptions of professional learning communities. Perusal of the data for emerging themes and categories was followed by revision of those themes and categories. This process was repeated with every round of analysis. Concepts achieved recognition as a part of the theory by repeating themselves in multiple interviews and in participant observations.

All field notes and emerging themes were kept in a digital format on the computer. As themes emerged from the data analysis an individual list was created for every individual interview and focus group. Multiple reviews of the transcribed notes and listening to the recordings, participants' phrases and words were placed under corresponding themes. All information was digitally cut and pasted to ensure the accuracy and increase the validity of the process.

Coding techniques were implemented to organize the data from the analysis of the individual interviews and determine the overriding themes that emerged from the various data collection methods. Glesne (2006) stresses that "coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data that are applicable to your research purpose. By putting like minded pieces together into data clumps, you create an organizational framework" (p. 152). I compartmentalized data, created specific identifying codes, and then refined and named the codes as new data were incorporated. Once the specific themes were determined and codes established, the information obtained and recorded from each of the interviews was merged into one document that contained all of the themes and supporting phrases made by the participants. As I merged concepts from each interview and participant observation, concepts were merged into categories. Not all concepts became categories, some were placed under other sub headings and others were significantly absent and were excluded from the coding process.

The basic cut paste technique was implemented to determine which segments of the transcripts were vital to the research questions. A simple process of thematic coding assisted in identification of basic themes and categories that emerged from all data sources. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), this type of content analysis "determines which segments of the transcripts are important, develops a categorization systems for the topics discussed by the group, selects representative statements for the topics from the transcript, and develops an interpretation of what it all means" (p. 105). A three level process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was employed as a strategy to

identify specific themes and patterns that emerged from the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Open coding, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) "stimulates generative and comparative questions" (p. 12). Asking these questions allowed the researcher opportunities to be sensitive to the empirical implications. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state:

> Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data . . . [It] refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't. (p. 4)

This comparison of the data generated categories specificity and allowed the researcher to determine specific properties and dimensions. With the comparison, the researcher created conceptual labels that were similar and grouped together to form categories and subcategories. This process of open coding stimulated comparative questions that guided the researcher during the process of data collection.

Entering the phase of axial coding, the categories were further developed by testing the relationships found in the categories and subcategories against the data. The process of axial coding assisted in making conceptual linkages and in making the theoretical concepts denser. For the purpose of this study, axial coding specifically involved generating categories and investigating possible correlations found in all of the individual interviews, participant observations, and focus group interviews. During this second level of coding, the focus shifted on the significant words and phrases to see what patterns or themes emerged. A constant comparative analysis was implemented to determine what themes were comparatively the same and different (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All theoretical relationships

projected during the phase of axial coding were considered provisional until verified through frequency in a comparative analysis of the data that was being collected.

Once the preliminary coding was accomplished, the data were reviewed for the purpose of selective coding. Dominant and subordinate themes were identified and the analytical strategy of theme content was applied. During this process, all categories were merged around central categories. This process allowed the researcher to provide descriptive details with the major categories that emerged during the analysis of the data. It was during this phase that categories that were not as well developed were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through this systematic process of data analysis, categories, patterns, and relationships became transparent within the data sources.

Originally, I had planned to use Atlas TI as a part of the coding process. However, the richness of the data analysis that I sought could not be achieved using the computer program. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that people possess social abilities that enable them to intermingle and change accordingly with the environment while at the same time adjusting for environmental changes. People also possess the capacity to ascertain ample quantities of information that will verify the data. This ability to analyze the data and obtain various meanings enabled the researcher opportunities to explore emerging themes as they became evident. Likewise, I had the ability to perceive situations from a holistic viewpoint. The computer program could not support this type of analysis or interaction with the data therefore I assumed the responsibility for all coding and analysis of the data.

Study Limitations

Personal involvement in a professional learning community forced me to constantly evaluate and reflect on the data that was collected. Reason (1994) shares, “Critical

subjectivity involves a self reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing" (as cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 126). Being aware of the "ground" on which the researcher stood was essential to maintain at the forefront while conducting this research. Creating a process that allowed the researcher the opportunity to constantly reflect, question, and evaluate increased the probability for presenting valid data from the actual participants' perspectives.

Sharing the data and the findings with other colleagues to determine if they interpreted the data with the same perceptions was another critical component for data analysis. This strategy allowed the opportunity to gain different perspectives and helped me to avoid missing critical pieces to the data analysis. Often, people who are not directly involved can see the obvious patterns that would otherwise be overlooked. Their disassociation with the research provided a different lens for analyzing the data. The process also created the opportunity for validating the existing data analysis. One person with whom data was shared with was Dr. Amy DeCaron, PhD. in Industrial Psychology. Dr. DeCaron served as the proxy during the focus group interviews. After the interviews, Dr. DeCaron wrote a summarization of her findings from the focus group interview. Her summarizations of the data supported the overall findings of the study; however I did not review the summarization until after the data had been analyzed and reanalyzed. Validation of information was strengthened because different lenses revealed the same data analysis. Dr. DeCaron's analysis of the data from the focus groups was a critical component for validation because she has no interaction with the field of education. Her experience is from a business perspective; therefore Dr. DeCaron was able to provide insight through an entirely different lens.

Understanding the foundation and structure of a professional learning community from the researcher's perspective afforded opportunities to develop more in-depth questions for the research process. The structure of the interview questions and probing questions allowed participants the opportunity to share more in-depth information. Knowledge of professional study groups also caused me to reflect and evaluate professional learning communities from different perspectives.

Chapter 4: Analysis of the Data

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for ongoing and effective professional growth. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities?
2. Are professional learning communities perceived by teachers as opportunities for professional growth?
3. Does participation in a professional learning community create continuous and relevant professional development that is sustained?

To adequately investigate the proposed questions, the following data collection procedures were employed: 1) Professional Learning Community Assessment, 2) participant observations, 3) focus groups, and 4) individual interviews.

This chapter begins with a description of the setting as portrayed by the findings from the PLCA and a basic introduction of the participants directly involved in the research study. The presentations of the results include the patterns, commonalities, and discrepancies that are revealed in the study. Patterns and themes that emerged were discussed and the framework for the presentation of the findings in relation to the three research questions created. The findings from the data analysis are organized to correspond with the research questions. A generalization that summarizes the results is also provided.

Throughout the discussion, the researcher provides specific examples of data to highlight the findings. Data were selected to exemplify the findings that were representative of the research questions. These data include excerpts from participant observations of professional study groups as well as the focus groups and individual interviews. Specific examples of typical patterns across the research study are presented.

Description of Sample

Prior to the start of the study, 14 teachers, who comprised 47% of the study site's certified population, were randomly selected to complete the PLCA, a 45 item Likert scale questionnaire. This questionnaire was used to determine the appropriateness of the study site. Of the 12 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 11 participated in the focus group. This group was a random representation of the school's population as described in Chapter 3, Table 2. Augustus Elementary, has 30 certified teachers serving kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth grades, Exceptional Children's Program, English as a Second Language Program, Physical Education, Media, Art, and Guidance. All of the participants were currently and actively involved in the professional learning community and had been for a minimum of three years. Of the teachers participating in the focus groups, 36% had between 20-27 years of teaching experience, 46% had between 10-20 years of experience, and 18% had between 3-10 years of experience teaching. According to the North Carolina Report Card, the experience levels for the entire staff include 17% of the teachers with 0-3 years of experience, 33% with 4-10 years of experience and 50% with more than 10 years of experience teaching.

From the eleven focus group participants, seven were selected to participate in the individual interviews. This group was selected based on a representation of grade levels

taught, years of experience teaching and years of involvement in a professional learning community. Table 3 depicts a representation of the group chosen for individual interviews.

Table 3

Individual Interview Participants' Demographics

Participant	Years Experience	Grade Level	Years in PLC
1	11	ESL	5
2	22	Kindergarten	5
3	15	2nd	8
4	27	4th	5
5	3	1st	3
6	17	3rd	5
7	21	5th	5

All but one of the participants' involvement in a professional learning community had occurred at the study site. The one participant who had involvement in a professional learning community at a different site had eight years of experience with professional learning communities and had been involved in the implementation and development of two professional learning communities. The teachers selected from the study represented grades kindergarten, first, third, fourth, fifth, and English as a Second Language.

Survey Description of the Setting

To determine whether or not the school operated as a professional learning community as defined by research found in Chapter 2, fourteen participants were asked to complete the PLCA and 86% participation in the survey was achieved. As noted in Chapter 3, the PLCA was field-tested in schools resulting in 247 valid surveys to assure the instrument's reliability and validity. Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients were utilized and found the instrument maintained a satisfactory internal consistency rate (Oliver et al., 2003)

The PLCA's 4-point likert scale survey assesses the five attributes that are characteristic of a professional learning community (Oliver et al., 2003). The statements of the survey are categorized into representative groups:

1. Items 1-10 focus on the attributes supporting Shared and Supportive Leadership
2. Items 11-18 assess Shared Values and Vision
3. Items 19-26 determine the participants' perceptions in regards to Collective Learning and Application.
4. Items 27-32 assess the Shared Personal Practice
5. Items 33-45 pertain to Supportive Conditions (Oliver, et. al., 2003)

Responses to the items are as follows:

SD = Strongly Disagree = 1

D = Disagree = 2

A = Agree =3

SA = Strongly Agree =4

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used prior data from another study (Hill, 2007) to determine what the specific positive perception responses (agree and strongly agree) percentage ranges would need to be to determine that the study site was operating as a professional learning community. The ranges are as follows:

Non-demonstration of PLC – 0-44%

Initiation Stage – 45-64%

Implementation Stage – 65-84%

Institutionalization Stage – 85-100% (Hill, 2007)

The Professional Learning Community Organizer (Huffman & Hipp, 2003), as shown in Figure 1, defines the 3 dimensions of development for an organization which is operating as a professional learning communities: 1) Initiation Stage, 2) Implementation Stage, 3) Institutionalization Stage.

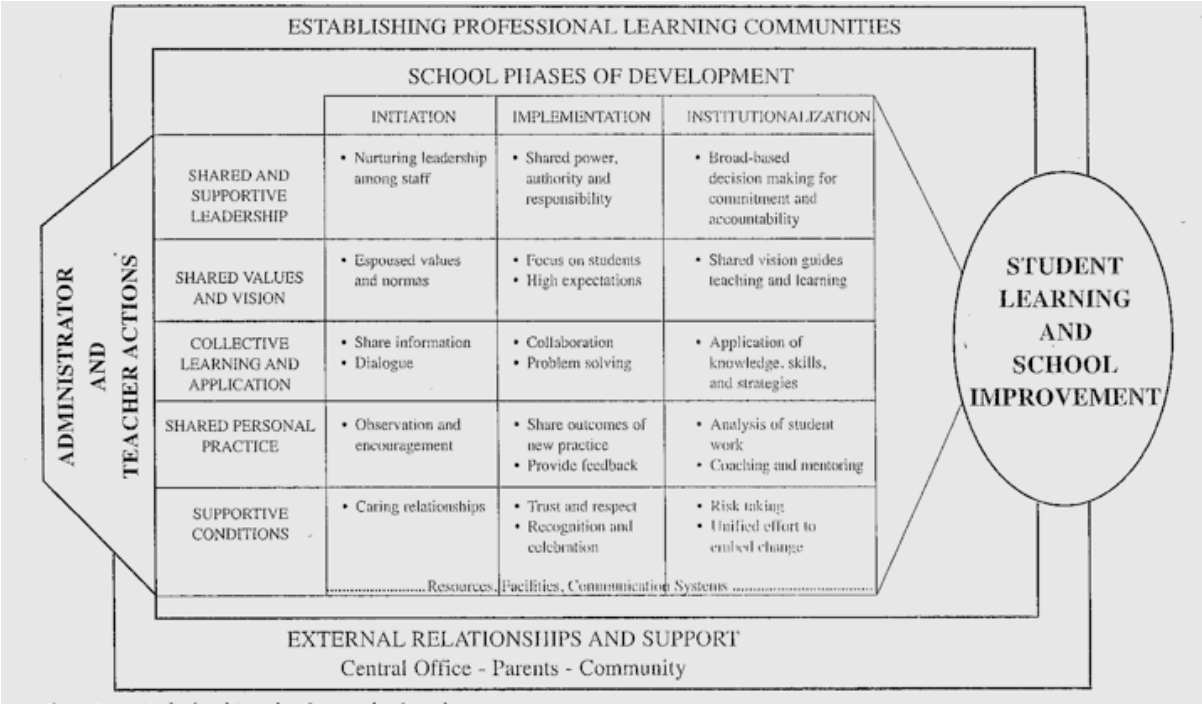

Figure 1. *Professional Learning Community Organizer.* (Huffman & Hipp, 2003)

The percentages of positive responses for the 5 subsections were calculated to determine the stage of operation for the proposed site. As noted in Tables 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, 97% of the teachers surveyed indicated a positive response for shared and supportive leadership, 96% responded positively towards the attributes characterized by share values and vision, 96% supported that the school practices collective learning and application, 93% stated that the staff support shared personal practice and 97% indicated that there are supportive conditions that enable them to sustain a professional learning community. The

overall results indicated a 96% positive response on the Professional Learning Community Assessment. This percentage places the school at the institutionalized stage in the phases of development of a professional learning community. These findings supported that the school was indeed an excellent model to study in regards to a professional learning community.

Table 5

PLCA Participant Responses: Shared and Supportive Leadership

Shared and Supportive Leadership								
Question #	**SD=1**	**D=2**	**% of D**	**A=3**	**% of A**	**SA=4**	**% of SA**	**Total % Positive Responses**
1		1	8%	5	42%	6	50%	
2				4	33%	8	67%	
3				6	50%	6	50%	
4				2	17%	10	83%	
5				8	67%	4	33%	
6				6	50%	6	50%	
7		2	17%	6	50%	4	33%	
8				6	50%	6	50%	
9				7	58%	5	42%	
10		1	8%	8	67%	3	25%	
% Totals			3%		48%		48%	97%

Table 6

PLCA Participant Responses: Shared Values and Vision

Shared Values and Vision								
Question #	**SD=1**	**D=2**	**% of D**	**A=3**	**% of A**	**SA=4**	**% of SA**	**Total % Positive Responses**
11				6	50%	6	50%	
12				6	50%	6	50%	
13				9	75%	3	25%	
14				5	42%	7	58%	
15		1	8%	7	58%	4	33%	
16		1	8%	5	42%	6	50%	
17				6	50%	6	50%	
18		2	17%	3	25%	7	58%	
% Totals			4%		49%		47%	96%

Table 7

PLCA Participant Responses: Collective Learning and Application

Collective Learning and Application								
Question #	**SD=1**	**D=2**	**% of D**	**A=3**	**% of A**	**SA=4**	**% of SA**	**Total Positive Responses**
19				4	33%	8	67%	
20				6	50%	6	50%	
21				6	50%	6	50%	
22				6	50%	6	50%	
23				6	50%	6	50%	
24				7	58%	5	42%	
25		4	33%	3	25%	5	42%	
26				9	75%	3	25%	
% Totals			4%		49%		47%	96%

Table 8

PLCA Participant Responses: Shared Personal Practice

Shared Personal Practice								
Question #	**SD=1**	**D=2**	**% of D**	**A=3**	**% of A**	**SA=4**	**% of SA**	**Total Positive Responses**
27				7	58%	5	42%	
28		2	17%	9	75%	1	8%	
29				8	67%	4	33%	
30		3	25%	6	50%	3	25%	
31				6	50%	6	50%	
32				6	50%	6	50%	
							208%	
% Totals			7%		58%		35%	93%

Table 9

PLCA Participant Responses: Supportive Conditions

Supportive Conditions								
Question #	**SD=1**	**D=2**	**% of D**	**A=3**	**% of A**	**SA=4**	**% of SA**	**Total Positive Responses**
33				5	42%	7	58%	
34				8	67%	4	33%	
35				4	33%	8	67%	
36		1	8%	9	75%	2	17%	
37				9	75%	3	25%	
38				10	83%	2	17%	
39		2	17%	7	58%	3	25%	
40		1	8%	5	42%	6	50%	
41				10	83%	2	17%	
42				3	25%	9	75%	
43				5	42%	7	58%	
44				7	58%	5	42%	
45				9	75%	3	25%	
% Totals			3%		58%		39%	97%

Analysis of the Data

In the analysis of all data, grounded theory was used as the framework for developing an understanding of the experiences of the participants. The use of this theory requires that the researcher perform multiple readings of the data to discover concepts and relationships that exist within the context of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). To begin the process of generating theory from data, the researcher used open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify the emerging patterns, categories, and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

For purposes of this study, open coding was the first level of analysis. With every observation and interview every word and sentence of the transcript from the recorded interviews were read and reread by the researcher with the objective of determining the overriding meaning of the data. The researcher also listened to the digital recordings and followed along with the written transcripts with the intent of looking for significant words and phrases. During this coding process, the words and phases that emerged as patterns or themes were listed in a computer document. An individual document with key phases and words was kept for each individual interview and participant observation.

The second level coding, axial coding, was initiated to converge on the significant words and phrases that were reoccurring in all of the individual interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observations. I accomplished this analysis of the data by rereading all of the data and determining what overall themes were emerging. The original documents that were kept for each individual interview were then merged under the categories and themes that had emerged. This was accomplished through a constant comparative analysis investigating the similarities and differences found in the data. I looked for possible relationships among the categories.

Entering the third phase of the coding process, data were reviewed for identification of dominant and subordinate themes. All of the individual documents from all of the individual interviews and participant observations were merged into one document and the phases from the participants were placed under the corresponding categories and themes. Data were separated by the appropriate category and then by the corresponding research question.

The first opportunity for data collection was the participant observations of the vertical planning and professional study group sessions. During these initial observational periods, I did not interact with the participants. Spradly (1980) defines this role of participant observation as the complete observer, whereby the researcher assumes a passive stance and is uninvolved and detached, passively recording behavior from a distance. Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe participant observation as the inquiry to understand the action. This inquiry involves developing an understanding all aspects of the observed practices and relationships in order to capture the cultural setting. During the observational phase I recorded the following behaviors that were demonstrated on a reoccurring basis in both study groups and vertical planning sessions. Participants were:

1. Nodding their heads in agreement.
2. Sitting around the table leaning in towards the other participants.
3. Laughing and smiling.
4. Actively engaged, taking notes and interacting in the conversations.
5. Not engaged in side conversations. All discussions were relevant and pertinent towards the school's goals and improving student achievement.
6. Making eye contact with the persons talking.

7. Making hand gestures and movements indicating engagement in the discussing.
8. Listening intently and did not interrupt other participants. A high level of respect was shown for every participant.
9. Entering the vertical alignment meetings comfortably and greeting one another.
10. Bringing necessary information and instructional strategies that they could share.
11. Bringing relevant student data for discussion.
12. Sharing student data openly without hesitation.
13. Asking their colleagues for help with development of instructional strategies.

Through this observational phase, I was able to watch the interaction of the participants and gain insight of the experiences that evolved from a professional learning community. A review of field notes and analysis of the data collected during the observational period assisted in the preparation of potential probing questions for the focus groups. Below is a list of categories and themes that surfaced from the analysis of the participant observation data.

1. Collaboration
2. Freedom to openly share ideas and suggestions
3. Ability to share areas of strengths and weaknesses
4. Open doors environment, level of comfort with each other
5. Student centered and focused on achievement
6. Data driven decision making
7. Teacher empowerment
8. High level of participation and involvement
9. Positive morale among all stakeholders

10. Positive interactions with all

11. Celebration of successes

Continuing with the process of open coding, I read all transcripts from the audiotapes collected during the focus groups with the intent of gaining an overall perspective of the data. Relevant words, phrases, and sentences that continuously emerged from the data were listed as possible codes or categories. Possible relationships between categories were listed and viable subcategories were placed under general headings. After multiple readings of the transcripts and listening to the digital recordings of the focus groups, I began to construct specific categories that emerged from the focus group and the participant observation data.

At the onset of the analysis phase, 23 provisional categories emerged from the data:

1. Ownership

2. Being more responsible for learning

3. Teacher and learner / learner and teacher

4. Horizontal and vertical collaboration

5. Peer support

6. Data driven decision-making

7. Safety net to try new things/ risk free environment

8. Seek ways improve your teaching/ broadens knowledge base

9. Research based/ Forces you to take the time to research

10. Implementation of ideas into classroom

11. Recognition of the need for change and supports change

12. Expectations set higher for teachers

13. Builds relationships among staff members

14. Share strengths/ Experts in the building used to support professional development
15. Empowers / builds leadership
16. Treated as professionals
17. Better than traditional workshops/ traditional workshops limited
18. Increased participation
19. Accountability to the school
20. Cost effective
21. Builds confidence
22. Ongoing learning
23. Common Goals/ common vision

The reading of this initial phase of data assisted in the preparation for the individual interviews. Many of the probing questions used during the individual interviews were derived from the data collected during the focus groups and the participant observations. The use of the focus group data enabled me to gain a deeper perspective of the participants' experiences with professional learning communities in regards to professional growth and allowed me to go more in-depth during the individual interview phase.

Subsequent to the completion of the study, I continued to utilize the process of open coding to bring forth any provisional categories that emerged during the analysis of the data. The use of open coding during this phase stimulated generative and comparative questions, which helped investigate the empirical implications of each of the provisional categories. After reviews of the field notes from the participant observations, listening to the digital recordings and reading all of the transcripts from the individual interviews and focus groups, I looked for specific properties and dimensions within each category.

Using the process of axial coding, categories were grouped and subcategories formed based on the specific properties and relationships that had emerged from the data. To test the relationships I looked for specific data through the words and phrases from the participants that would support the categories and subcategories. Digitally cutting and pasting, from the transcribed notes, specific quotes assisted in determining the validity of the categories that had emerged. As shown in Figure 2, through this process I was able to establish 10 basic categories.

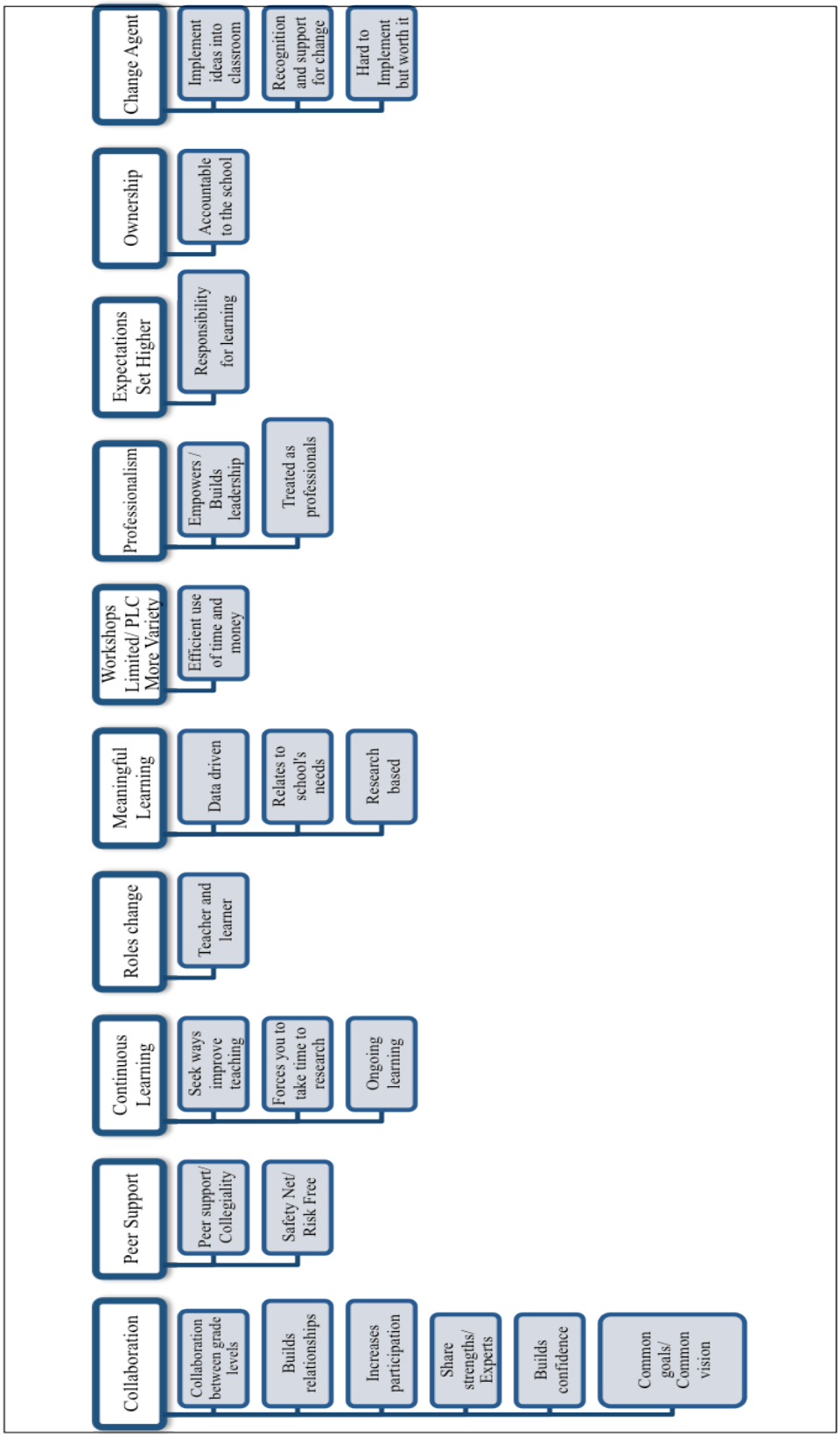

Figure 2. *Ten categories with subcategories.*

To make the concepts of the categories denser, specific linkages between the provisional categories were investigated. Common themes within the provisional categories and sub categories emerged once the data were reread. Themes were then merged under five identified headings as shown in Figure 3.

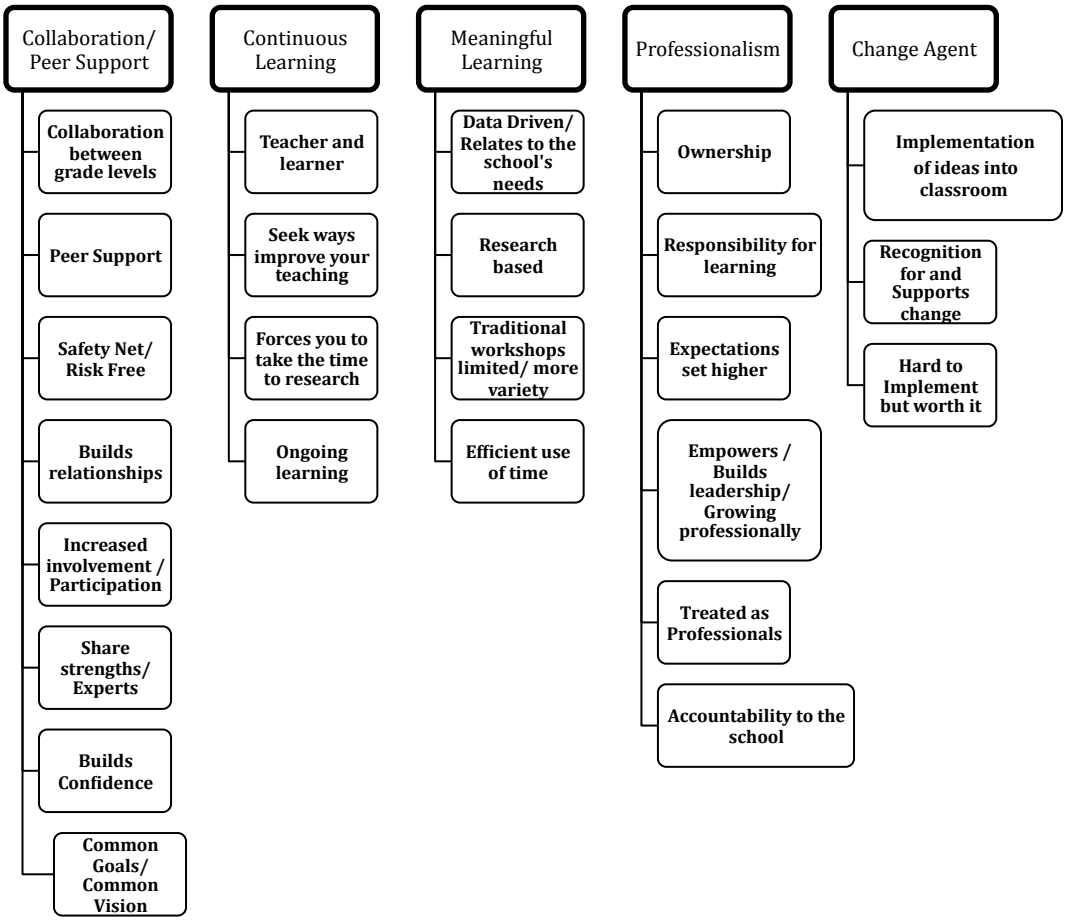

Figure 3. *The five provisional categories and sub categories merged.*

This process provided entry into the selective coding phase. During this phase, I reread all of the data. Phases from the participants, gathered during the review of data were used to support the indentified categories. Notes were made in order to establish similarities and differences. As shown in Figure 4, I was able to unify all categories around five

overriding core concepts: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, 5) Change Agent.

Figure 4. *Five core concepts.*

Participant Observations

The initial period of investigation started with participant observations of vertical planning and professional study group sessions. The observations granted me the opportunity to study the interactions, discussions, and composition of the groups. The first observation was of grade level vertical planning sessions that lasted approximately one hour. Grade level teachers were paired with the grade level either above or below. On average, each group was comprised of seven participants. The make up of the groups was as follows: Kindergarten and first, second and third, fourth and fifth. Each group had an assigned facilitator and recorder. The principal had established a series of questions to guide the

vertical planning session. The teams were analyzing student data and determining the areas of need for the school in correlation with the state standards. During this time, the teams talked openly about what the students needed to learn to be prepared for the upcoming grade level. Various sources of student data were used during the dialogue between grade levels as foundations for planning lessons and developing strategies for the grade level.

From the observation it quickly became apparent that all of the teachers were eager to share their thoughts and actively participated in the conversations. Teachers sitting closely around the table and nodding their heads were some of the body language that demonstrated an increased level of eagerness to participate. They all made eye contact with each other and demonstrated active listening skills. Participants leaned into the conversations with their arms on the table and were quick to engage in the discussion with various thoughts or ideas that were relevant to the topic being discussed. Every teacher in the groups shared various thoughts and perspectives. Teachers discussed basic strategies as well as philosophical views. Strategies that had proven to be successful with specific content were discussed with the group. Every teacher wrote down ideas and asked for more information. One group stressed, "we have begun looking outside of the box for strategies that work." The interaction and dialogue supported statements made during the focus group and individual interviews regarding professional learning communities as a venue for collaboration.

During this period, teachers demonstrated, a high level of collaboration by openly sharing ideas and strategies that were working in their classrooms. Participants shared their concerns and asked for suggestions from their peers. Without any hesitation teachers shared ideas and discuss strategies that had proven to be successful for the students. Several of the teachers invited their colleagues to their classrooms to observe different strategies that they

were sharing. Some of the teachers worked out times and schedules for when they could come to observe. The teachers referenced research materials that they had used in various professional study groups as possibilities for addressing the areas of concern that were being discussed. Student data were used to guide the group's discussion and supported the decisions that were made in regards to the goals established by the group. Each grade level talked specifically about various issues concerns and successes that were being experienced by the students they served. During the entire observed period, there was never a lull in the discussion. When the time for vertical planning had ended, the teachers left the room still discussing possible ideas and strategies for addressing the areas of concern found in the student data.

For the book study and grade level spotlight, all staff members were required to attend and were assigned, by the principal, to sit at various tables in the media center. There were approximately 65 participants attending the professional study group. The session started with the announcements of celebrations. The principal highlighted success stories in regards to curriculum that were occurring throughout the building. She also presented data that supported the successes. From these observations, evidence was presented in regards to the school's vision and goals for their students. All conversations, discussions, and information were specifically directed towards improving student achievement through relationship building. Following the celebrations, the first grade was spotlighted for the instructional successes that they were experiencing. The principal shared with me prior to the observation, that each month she encouraged various grade levels to highlight their curriculum and successful instructional strategies. She indicated that these interactions promoted a sense of cohesiveness and transparency between grade levels.

The first grade teachers and assistant started with a PowerPoint presentation. Each slide focused on a particular curricular area and the successful implementation of research based strategies that had been employed to teach the various concepts. The group also shared student made products that resulted from the use of the strategy that was being shared. One of the specific focuses of the presenting group was the use of twenty first century tools in all of the core content areas. The group shared how the tools they were using supported the school's vision for the integrated use of technology. Staff members questioned the group and discussion began about how they implement the strategies being discussed at their grade level.

Based on the interaction and open willingness to share that the group portrayed, it became obvious that the teachers were eager to share with their colleagues and have a strong desire for collaboration. All of the observed conversations were focused on instruction that supported student achievement. There were no sidebar conversations noted or off task behaviors demonstrated during this time of sharing. The participant observations supported and demonstrated the overall perceptions of the teachers in regards to their definition of a professional learning community. Teachers interacted with each other openly and were eager to share with their colleague successes as well as failures.

Following the presentation and period of open discussion, the groups moved into a reflective time for their book study. All staff members were required to read and come prepared to discuss the book entitled, *The Fred Factor* (Sanborn, 2004). The overriding concept of the book revolved around building and nurturing relationships. The principal had provided guiding questions that were to be used as possible topics for conversation. Participants at the different tables shared their perceptions of the assigned reading. The

groups shared how the concepts presented in the book related specifically to the goals of the schools. Each group discussed how they could implement the findings of the book to initiate change in the school. In closing, the principal led a discussion that provided time for each group to share what they had discussed. During this time, many of the participants shared how the development of professional study groups, collaborative planning time, and vertical planning was creating a supportive, risk free environment for teachers. Throughout the group discussion, I overheard many of the groups sharing how their school "family" encouraged them to achieve beyond what they thought was possible. They shared how the open door concept created an environment where they felt like they could ask any question and go to anyone for assistance. They stated that the principal helped them build relationships and tried to bring out the best in people. The group also commented that the principal had high expectations for everyone. The session closed with ideas that the school could implement to create a more supportive and nurturing environment at the school. The teachers connected with the book and were adamant that they had to be good role models for their students.

Focus Group Interviews and Individual Interviews

The observation of interaction, camaraderie, and collaboration that occurred during the participant observations created a framework and understanding for how the group perceived and operated under the concept of a professional learning community. The following week, two focus group interviews were conducted. The focus groups were conducted during hour and a half sessions on two separate days. Individual interviews were conducted the following week with seven of the focus group participants. Throughout the focus group and individual interviews, participants frequently referred to the framework and

characteristics that supported their school's professional learning community. Various patterns and concepts emerged from the interviews and observations. In the following sections, I will break down the data from the interviews to individually answer the three questions developed for the research study. Data for each question will be organized around the five core concepts that emerged.

Research Question 1. The first research question, "What are teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities?" develops a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' overall concept of a professional learning community. The underlying theme with this question is, "How do the teachers at this school define a professional learning community?" To explore the research question, the transcriptions of the structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations were analyzed using the coding process as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Quotes from the focus group and individual interviews are provided in this section that respond to the research question, "What are teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities?" The responses are organized in the context of the five identified themes: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, 5) Change Agent.

Collaboration. Research indicates that one of the leading attributes of a professional learning community is collaboration and collegiality. Leonard and Leonard (2001) stress that "professional collaboration is evidenced when teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals" (p. 10). Interview participant 4 supported the findings in the research when she described the professional learning community at the school as "a group of people with a common need or goal to learn together and from each other."

Interview participant 2 stated,

> I think a professional learning community for me as a teacher, it is where the teacher is a learner, where we are learning new ways to bring success for our students and learning new practices, learning from each other what other teachers in the building are doing that is successful.

Interview participant 7 declared that a professional learning community was "having an open mind, being creative enough to use what you get from that group the best way that suits your class."

Many of the participants affirmed that the support that was received from the professional learning community was inspirational and motivated them to achieve at higher level. One participant remarked, "You take the best of what your colleagues are doing and try to apply it, higher expectations pushes you forward" (Interview Participant 2). The collaboration in a professional study "forces you out of a comfort zone, forces you to learn new research based strategies" (Focus Group 1 Participant).

Various participants shared multiple examples of collaboration. A participant from focus group 2 acknowledged, "We all learn about each other, we want to share and help each other." Another participant indicated, "You are accountable to your colleagues and the people who are more important at your side" (Focus Group 2 Participant). These comments are supported by the research conducted by Barth (2002) as he stressed that "the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else" (p. 8).

Because of the incessant opportunities for engaged collegiality, collaboration at this school has become a natural occurrence. As one focus group participant specified, "We

collaborate a lot during our common planning time and even at lunch." Interview participant 1 shared, "We do meet more as a team, we have our common planning times now which has helped out a whole lot, again the study groups where you may or may not be with your team and also the vertical alignment. There are just a lot of opportunities for togetherness." Under the guise of collaboration, participants shared many relevant concepts.

One of the characteristics discussed was the opportunity for exposure to diversity because of the interaction with other people and grade levels. In a review of current research for Alberta Education, the InPraxis Group (2006) found "those who share the same concerns and challenges learn more effectively if they work together" (p. 29). Under this format of collaboration, teachers learn about various grade levels concepts, strategies, and expectations. They are also able to develop relationships with other people within the building. One focus group 2 participant shared,

> We're kind of forced to be with different people and that was honestly good, because we tend to stay within our own grade levels. With our book study, I was with others, for instance, a music teacher, so you have diversity, which was nice because I didn't know those people. Because of that book we ended up talking about what you are doing in class and other things beside the book. You got to know those people.

Another focus group 2 participant shared a similar response, "I think of it like this, with our study groups, every year I have been with a bunch of different people that I can learn from and not just my grade level." The opportunities to build and establish relationships creates future opportunities for collaboration as stated by one of the participant, "Having that connection with somebody whether you might have gotten that connection from a study

group or from doing something together, you are more likely to come back and collaborate with them later, work with them later" (Focus Group 1 Participant).

With multiple opportunities to collaborate with a variety of people, participants indicated that you quickly learn the strengths and levels of expertise in the building. Interview participant 1 affirmed,

> We are not forced to be (collaborative), but you are given the opportunities and you are expected to see those opportunities. The more time you spend with people, the more relationships develop and you play on each other strengths and weaknesses.

This extension of collaboration has also developed a strong supportive network as indicated by one participant's comment, "I think it just creates an environment that people are more supportive and want to see other people succeed. You don't feel as badly when you have to ask them to do things for you." Another person declared that she felt, "the model was huge. I think we know that it (PLC) makes it (teaching) easier to get by any tough spots in the road." Several participants shared comments indicating that "you have your peer right next door to bounce ideas off of, they are right here and I can ask her (another teacher) if I don't know" (Focus Group 2 Participant). Interview participant 7 asserted,

> The doors are always open. Teachers are more than happy to have somebody come in and just sit down to observe. There's an openness for people to come in and see what we are doing. I think that has developed as a result of the professional learning community because we all feel comfortable with what we are doing and we are confident with what we are doing.

The data collected from this study are supported by the research of Kruse and Louis (1998) who identified trust as the momentum for creating collegiality, "it induces a sense of

loyalty, commitment and effectiveness necessary to maintain a shared focus on students" (p. 1). Kruse and Louis went on to describe the process of collaboration as the "de-privatization of practice" (p. 2). Barth (2002) supported the research of Kruse and Louis by suggesting, "once the exchange of craft knowledge becomes institutionally sanctioned, educators no longer feel pretentious or in violation of a taboo by sharing their insights" (p. 6). As indicated by the comments made by the interview participants, the collaboration created by the structure of the professional learning community has enhanced the opportunities to share information with one another in a non-threatening and supportive environment

> it is nice to be with people that I know and trust and that it's right here, so I'm not having to go anywhere. It definitely makes me reflect on my teaching and it's in a safe environment because these are my friends here so that is a good thing. (Interview Participant 1)

Interview participant 3 stressed, "You are not in a threatening environment. Everybody wants to learn from everyone else." A focus group 2 participant also shared, "We all have learned about each other, we want to share and help each other."

This type of non-threatening environment supports a high level of openness. Interview participant 2 declared, "Professional learning communities allow you to the opportunity to be transparent." This level of transparency promotes a sense of professionalism as evidenced by interview participant 5 when she avowed, "I think another part is really opening up yourself and having other people open up and just talk and tell you what you are doing and be honest and say I'm weak at this, I need help in this." Supporting this level of transparency, during the interview with participant 2 she stated,

> It is just a security and the people in the study groups they feel okay to say this

> doesn't work or I don't know how to do this or how to teach this. There is that transparency, but do you have any ideas or how would you approach this and no one is thinking she is a bad teacher or she ought to know the answer to that I have never felt anything like that.

Interview participant 8 acclaimed,

> If we didn't have the professional learning community and I was in my room teaching and we weren't working as a team throughout our school and I didn't know what the teacher next door was doing, I would feel uncomfortable about going and asking for advice. Probably because I would maybe feel intimidated or fearful that what is she going to think of me if I don't even know how to teach this or if I'm sharing with her that I'm not being successful at this. Just having that camaraderie that has developed has been very beneficial.

The collaboration also endorses a sense of unity and focus as supported by interview participant 5, "I think it brings the school together and everyone is put on the same track on where we are going as a school." The professional learning community

> brings you back to reality because I think sometimes you get so focused in your own world that you are sometimes not aware that you might be missing a piece. I think it brings us back to "wow" you know something you can learn from every grade level. Sometimes it's real hard when you get into own grade level not to remember (what the other grade levels are doing). (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> A long time ago when I first came here, there used to be a division between upper grades versus lower grades, but now I feel like we are all working towards the same

> goal and there is not that division any more. We all have the same expectations. (Interview Participant 2)

The collaboration created from the involvement in a professional learning community provides a constant reminder of what is important as specified by a focus group 1 participant, "We are all in this together, we all want to have student achievement. That just goes to show how we all work together." The professional learning community

> is deliberate, it helps you have a focus so everyone is involved and we are learning together. I taught seven years before I came here I felt like I was kind of my own island, and now because of the professional learning community I feel connected to everyone. (Interview Participant 2)

"I think we are all working to collaborate and communicate to improve that student achievement to analyze scores to look and say what are we doing wrong here? Or what can we do to improve it?" (Interview Participant 5). "We are a collegial group where everyone has a common interest" (Interview Participant 4).

Professionalism. The participants in the study also revealed that through the opportunities for collaboration and the strong development of collegiality that is promoted by a professional learning community a new level of professionalism surfaces. A participant from focus group 1 proclaimed, "I think is important when you are part of the study group that you are accountable and you've got to come prepared or else you're not prepared to give and do your part." Several participants shared similar responses about their obligation as professionals, "You are accountable to your colleagues and the people who are more important at your side" (Focus Group 1 Participant).

The professional learning community creates a forum that endorses responsibility; therefore naturally creating a sense of belongingness and ownership towards achieving the goals for the school. Schmoker (2005) summarized this process by saying,

> It all starts with a group of teachers who meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, share strategies, and then create lessons to improve upon those levels. (p. xii)

One of the teachers confirmed that participation in a professional learning community

> benefits students more, you are the one developing it and you are just not being told. You process it and think how will it work in the classroom. It is your product to use in your classroom because you have created it. (Interview Participant 4)

Interview participant 7 also declared, "there is just so much that we are all working together for the good of the school for the good of the students I think that is what makes us that special team that we are here."

While conducting the individual interviews, several of the participants used the term "pushes me" when describing the professional learning community. I inquired as to what was meant by the term "pushes" and interview participant 7 responded,

> If you are in a group, you don't want to let your teammates down. You want to bring something to the table and like mentioned, it's a safe environment to do it because you have got other people who are experiencing the same things with you and you are throwing out ideas and brain storming and its just a good way to learn and grow with your peers that you are comfortable with.

Continuous involvement through the professional learning community has also developed a sense of professionalism from the arena of respect for peers. Many of the participants shared that because of the collaboration and opportunities to learn what was involved in the curriculum at various grade levels that there was a greater sense of respect.

> You are more open to talk about things and I also do think it has just changed that you respect other grade levels more. I think by having groups that diversified, you understand that Kindergarten is not just sitting around doing the calendar and naptime and that they really do so much. (Interview Participant 6)

She went on to share that

> I think it is helpful to a staff to understand that everyone is working for the growth of the child and it is not just your year, it is all the way from the kindergarten all the way out that that child learns, so yes it has changed. It is much more open to that type of feeling and community. (Interview Participant 6)

The level of responsibility to be an active member of the group also empowers teachers as leaders, "it is easier for me to collaborate with others and helps me to develop my leadership role" (Focus Group 2 Participant). One of the participants insisted, "Something big was expectations, leadership and expectations we have to arise to" (Focus Group 2 Participant). The natural progression and norms that generate a professional learning community also teaches the various roles of leadership. Interview participant 5 was working on her masters in school administration as a result of her participation in a professional learning community. During the interview she shared,

> I think that has really helped me professionally to even learn as a teacher leader about how to collaborate and communicate and keep within an agenda and keep with those norms and all go towards the same goal. (Interview Participant 5)

Interview participant 1 shared a similar experience,

> The advantages would be with renewing my National Boards and going through my masters. If I had not been here I don't know how I would have done my National Boards. I was just thinking back, professional growth experiences, you can't really count a workshop as a professional growth experience.

Continuous Learning. An extension of the professionalism that has evolved from the professional learning community is a framework for focused continuous learning. Hord (1997b) shares this framework creates "communities of continuous inquiry and improvement" (p. 1). A focus group 1 participant supported this research when she declared,

> Continuous learning from a PLC (professional learning community) has been awesome. I think we have really switched. It was jumbled professional development, a workshop on this and a workshop on this. Once we started determining this year our focus is going to be technology, I think once that started, that is when our professional development started to hit on one goal.

A participant from focus group 1 also shared that the professional learning community enables them to "get what I need specifically here right here on my turf."

The structure for learning within the context of a professional learning community provides a twenty first century review for defining continuous learning. Opportunities for continuous learning, according to interview participant 2,

> Reminds me that a teacher is a learner. It also definitely, whenever I'm the student or part of our group, it helps me to think in terms of my students and I think of how I enjoy learning and how a lot of students probably enjoy learning the same way. It reminds me of the twenty first century learning goals; communication, collaboration and cooperation in its not learning if it's teacher directed.

Opportunities for continuous learning within a professional learning community is impetus for change according to interview participant 3,

> In the past I have been set in my ways and if it isn't broken, don't fix it kind of thing or try to fix it and I think I have learned to look other ways that I might not have thought were very beneficial before, but kind of an openness as to my way is not the only way that there are other good ways. No matter what you are talking about, social interactions with kids or academics or just different pieces of it and how they all fit together.

A focus group 1 participant also supported this thrust for continuous learning when she stated, "I think a lot of the times it is (professional learning community) pushing me to collaborate and come up with new ideas and if I didn't have it, I may be doing what I did five years ago."

Meaningful learning. Dufour and Eaker (1998) assert,

> Each word of the phrase "professional learning community" has been chosen purposefully. A "professional" is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base … 'Learning' suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. The school that operates as a

> professional *learning* community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement. (p. xi-xii)

The participants involved in the study shared supporting comments that a professional learning community creates opportunities for meaningful learning. One participant responded,

> Before it was just hit or miss a lot of people were not going and now it's a lot more cohesive as a staff and you can see and know it can be overwhelming when you see that schedule. By the end of the year you can see growth that you have made and look what you've done and what you've learned, that makes a difference too. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

The opportunities are based on the needs of the school, which is derived from various forms of data. Interview participant 5 shared,

> We took out all the papers and sat down and analyzed our work, which you really don't have time to do unless you take time. Having other people read their papers instead of you just sitting there and reading everything and analyzing it. It was really worth it.

This form of data analysis enables the school to provide professional development that is specific to the needs of the school as supported by a participant from focus group 1, "I really feel like we are working toward the same things as far as our goal."

Meaningful learning also indicates that the professional development opportunities that are supported by the professional learning community are relevant to the needs of the individual participant. This level of relevance develops a sense of ownership to the issues

and helps to extend a sense of ownership and responsibility for the learning that evolves. Interview participant 4 acknowledged that the professional learning community was an

> opportunity to learn and grow. And I say opportunity because that is what it is, maybe at first I didn't feel that way but now I do. Like I said, being able to choose your own interest and your own need. When you go to staff development things that are offered through RESA (Regional Educational Service Alliance) or through the county, once you get there it's a set format and you cover what the instructor covers as opposed to being able to cover what you think needs to be covered in the professional learning communities.

As a follow up to comments about the professional development that were made during focus group 2, I asked why they felt that the professional development was meaningful and one of the participants stated,

> It's our choice because I know it goes back to if its something you want to learn about professionally or you know something you are weak in. I think our choice is you are going to get better at what you want to do. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

In the interview with participant 5, she confirmed the importance of being able to participate in professional development that specifically meets your needs,

> People have an interest in what they are studying about and if you are passionate what you want to do you are going to buy into it. I think that is why its really helpful that we get to sort of direct our own way or direct our choice of what we want to do for our study groups and I think that is how you get people to buy into it and then you see results.

Change Agent. The same passion for learning something new that results from the involvement in a professional learning community also facilitates a natural change agent for the school as evidenced by the following statement, "We have the opportunity set aside for what we are going to do; this instead of this the way we have always done it. We didn't have that time to just sit down and analyze" (Focus Group 2 Participant). Another focus group 2 participant also shared that the process and framework of the professional learning community creates an understanding for the need for change.

> If a survey comes down from the state, we are already doing it. And we say ok we are going to be the guinea pigs again and we have to do this because it's the new thing. Sometimes, that is kind of how you felt that we are being forced to do these things because it's what expected. But now you see why we have done it.

The opportunity for continuous learning and the understanding of the need for change instills in the participants a willingness to implement new strategies.

> In the past, I have been set in my ways. If it isn't broke, don't fix it or try to fix it. I think I have learned to look other ways that I might not have thought were very beneficial before. There is a kind of an openness as to my way is not the only way. There are other good ways. No matter what you are talking about, social interactions with kids or academics or just different pieces of it and how they all fit together. (Interview Participant 3)

Research Question 2. After developing a framework for how participants in this study defined a professional learning community, the analysis of the data for answering research question 2, "Are professional learning communities perceived by teachers as opportunities for professional growth?" was conducted. Quotes from the focus group and

individual interviews that respond to research question 2 are provided in this section. Analysis of the data in regards to this question is structured within the five categories that were identified through the process of coding: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, 5) Change Agent.

Collaboration . Collaborative environments focus on the "relationships and connections among individuals" (Harris, 2002, p. 22). The opportunity to develop relationships in a collaborative environment has promoted the forum for continuous learning at this research study site. During the interviews, participants shared,

> If we didn't have the professional learning community, I'm not so sure that we would have had the collaboration or I would have even felt comfortable talking to each other about what I was doing. I think openness, because we are a professional learning group. That really helped with that. (Focus Group 2 Participant)
>
> If we didn't have all those opportunities that are given to us through a professional learning community, I just think that we would kind of stay the same from year to year, unless we were personally seeking help through college classes. If that (professional learning community) wasn't offered in our school, our school would be very different here. I'm not sure we would be so happy and such a good team. I think that is one of the things about this school, we all feel like we have equal ownership in it. We are like family. (Interview Participant 8)

With the establishment of relationships in a collaborative environment, the candidates shared that they were able to identify the various strengths and levels of expertise that each teacher portrays. A participant in focus group 2 explained,

> I learned from the vertical planning, if I need technology help, I know whom I am going to go visit or if I need advice on how to help a student with reading, you know who is very knowledgeable and experienced.

This level of knowledge enabled the participants to seek out the resources from their collaborative colleagues. One participant summarized this concept stating,

> We each have our strengths and so you get ideas that are thrown out (to the group). What are you doing about this? Yes, piggybacking of ideas, because I alone can't think of things and do things on my own, but when I sit down with somebody I work with, we come back with much better ideas than we would have on our own. I think that makes a team. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

The openness created from the development of the professional learning community allowed teachers to take risk with one another and experiment with new strategies and instructional techniques. As a participant from focus group 1 declared, "There is safety in numbers. We all just learned from each other. It's just non-threatening. We all make mistakes together and if we need help we just go to each other" (Interview Participant 1). The participants avowed that they never felt isolated and that this security encouraged them to try new ideas

> because I think we have or can find safety in numbers so you don't really have to go by yourself. Most of the times when you are doing something here now you are not by yourself, you are either sharing with a group or at least one other person or going through it and you can always have somebody with you. (Interview Participant 1)

One of the participants shared how the collaboration had supported her during a change in grade levels. She indicated that the support received from the professional learning community helped her to make transitions with the new curriculum,

> Having moved this year from third grade to fourth grade, it (professional learning community) has really helped me tremendously with grade level writing, how to teach it, in fourth grade. I was a fish out water, in a new place and learning the writing assessment. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

The collaborative collegial environment allows teachers to broaden their experiences because of the contact with the multitude of teachers. The continuous collaborative involvement with others enables teachers to continually seek out and implement new ideas. Leonard and Leonard (2001) stress, "In effect, collaborative practice is exemplified when school staff members come together on a regular basis in their continuing attempts to be more effective teachers so that their students can become more successful learners" (p. 10). Professional learning communities allow teachers opportunities to connect with other teachers and create a natural environment for professional dialogue. During three individual interviews, participants shared similar statements that supported this level of collaboration,

> I think as I referenced before that you can become so by yourself, you can get so overwhelmed with day to day things or coming up with your plan for the week that you might not take the time and might not even know where to look. It is harder on your own to research a new strategy or just to reflect on your teaching. Whenever you have somebody else to bounce ideas off of just in that community you are hearing ideas from other folks. (Interview Participant 2)

> Just in talking with other teachers, particularly first grade teachers, because we are so close in grade level and proximity in the building and they will say check this out. So those little ah-ha are the ones that have meant the most to me. I guess the big one is being able to learn from others instead of me having to go through it and pick out the

> good things the good things have already been picked out. Instead of me having to all the legwork someone else has this good thing try this. (Interview Participant 4)
>
> It's not just me going out and reading that and trying to apply that in my classroom. We are all doing things as a team whether its our book study or in it as a team and it gives us the opportunity to share ideas, think about things that you might have saw something in the book that spark something that I didn't think about it in a certain way. So that is why I think is so vital to do this learning as a team because we learn so much from each other. (Interview Participant 8)

Senge (1990) emphasizes, "When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise" (p. 10).

Within this collaborative environment, professional development is also supported by peer observation. According to Louis and Marks (1998), effective professional development should also be coupled with facilitative coaching and peer observation. Coaching and peer observations afford teachers with opportunities to gain constructive insight from their colleagues about specific instructional practices. Participants from focus group 2 shared their experiences with peer observations within the framework of their professional learning community,

> A part of collaboration we had to do peer observations and we had an opportunity to go out to a school that had one of the highest science scores and we sat there and talked to the teachers and that was awesome to sit there and figure out what they were doing and then develop those opportunities for our students.

> We do peer observations. That is so beneficial too because I have visited first, second, fourth and fifth grade. It's just observing others practicing that is so beneficial for us. The observation I did this year I said, "wow" I have been wanting to do this, I have been wanting to be doing this in my classroom and I was kind of struggling with how I would manage that and I went and observed fifth grade teacher and went back to my classroom and started doing it right away. That not only benefits the kids, but I grew, I learned from that other teacher. Someone else when you go into a classroom and you say, 'oh they are doing this and that is similar to what we are doing', whether it is fifth grade or someone is doing first grade. That is so neat.

The interview participants' comments are in accordance with the research conducted by Dufour and Eaker (1998), "In a professional learning *community*, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. xi-xii).

Meaningful learning. Teachers desperately seek the opportunities to learn in meaningful ways (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dufour, 2006; Guskey 2003). According to a participant in the study, "We do need to grow and this way we are growing in a way that is usable for us. It's not staff development in name only, just so we are getting credits, it's appropriate to our needs" (Interview Participant 7). As this participant shared, without meaning the staff development opportunities are for naught. Meaningful is defined by Webster as "having a serious, important, or useful quality or purpose: making our lives rich and meaningful" (Mac book Computer Dictionary, 2010). In order for teachers to perceive staff development as opportunities for learning and professional growth, the opportunities

that are presented must be meaningful to all participants. Meaningful professional development could best be described by Danielson's (2002) model for effective school improvement, which includes four components:

- What we want – the goals of a school as a set of organizing principles and a way of defining its direction.
- What we believe – the belief structure or guiding principles that influence all aspects of the school's program.
- What we know – the research base for school practices.
- What we do – practices that support the school's goals, reflect its underlying values and relevant research. (InPraxis Group, 2006, p. 21)

Participants involved in this study provided comments supporting the concepts of meaningful learning within the confines of a professional learning community. Many of the participants shared comments regarding the buy in or ownerships that evolves from participation in professional development through a professional learning community. Several participants from focus group one made comments such as: "I think with the continuation of the learning group, you have depth to it. Now you have that buy in." "You are just not being told. You process it and think how will it work in the classroom? It's your product to use in your classroom because you have created it." "You are making things, you feel like it very productive, that is ours this year. We are making things that we take into class each week and use." "Teachers are working in a time that they need to be practical and efficient, therefore PLC work." During an individual interview, one of the participants also voiced,

> We are more involved in our learning here at the school. When you go to a workshop it is more like they present information to you. You might get to do a make and take item to take back to your classroom and try this, but here at the school we are involved in it and we are looking for those ways to make improvements in our classroom. So we have more ownership or more involvement then we do at a workshop. There they are kind of feeding it to us, here we are all building it together we are building that knowledge together. I think it much much more meaningful what we do here at a school at our schools versus a workshop. (Interview Participant 7)

Participants also shared that professional learning communities create professional development opportunities that are relevant to the specific needs of the individuals involved. A participant from focus group 1 declared, "I get exactly what I need and then I take it back to my classroom." Another participant shared, "We are allowed to explore and not just given information, but we have information to work with and see how things work and see how we can use it to suit what we need to do" (Interview Participant 8). The level of interest is also encapsulated based not only on the content, but the diversity of the people by which the professional learning community is created. Interview participant 8 acknowledged, "I think that the professional study group has been most beneficial because it's allowed me to study something that I am interested in and I have had several different opportunities to meet with different people."

The interest in learning the relevant content motivates individuals to practice the knowledge that has been gained. Because these opportunities are based at their school site, there is also constant support and reflective feedback during the implementation phase.

According to interview participant 1, "Lots of times when we go to workshops we really don't do anything when we get back, but it was different this time because we were actually doing what our study group was doing, so we were able to bring it back and use those things in our classroom."

According to the principal and teachers at the study site, professional development that is provided through their professional learning community is based on the needs of the school. This determination is based on various forms of data, which include surveys, benchmark assessment, and the North Carolina End of Grade Testing results. Several of the participants shared that the content that was provided through the professional learning community was more relevant to the needs of the school than information obtained at a traditional off campus workshop:

> The PLG (professional learning group) meets our needs as a school rather than a broad workshop. (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> Like when you go to a workshop and you come back and you don't actually have anything you can use you don't benefit from it, so maybe that's a big part is being able to use the things that we are learning in study groups. (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> When we go to workshop and I would say, 'well I'm going to do this one activity' and you would go to something all days and you would come back with one thing you wanted to use for one lesson. It was like hit or miss. You don't know when you are going to a workshop if you are going to get anything out of it. Where you know if you go to a study group that you know every time you meet you can come up with something. (Interview Participant 3)

> More pertinent to our own needs. A lot of times when you go to a traditional staff development you have a set agenda you may break off and go in different groups or stations, but there is not a lot of flexibility there and there maybe a thing or two that is appropriate to your particular class, your particular situation and usually it covers multi-levels or grades so you just don't come away with quite as much as pertinent. (Interview Participant 7)

Continuous Learning. It is human nature to want to learn. Not a day goes by that we don't learn something new. According to Barth (2002),

> The ability to learn prodigiously from birth to death sets human beings apart from other forms of life. The greatest purpose of school is to unlock, release, and foster this wonderful capacity. Schools exist to promote learning in all their inhabitants. Whether we are teachers, principals, professors, or parents our primary responsibility is to promote learning in others and in ourselves. (p. 9)

Professional learning communities promote professional growth by generating continuous opportunities for learning. This was reflected by interview participant 3 when she professed,

> I think it (professional learning community) said to us all even the young teachers that you have to continue to grow and learn. Things are changing rapidly, especially with the twenty first century skills and if you don't change things and learn how to incorporate some ideas, you will be left behind. When you are left behind, your children are left behind.

When one of the participants was asked, "What would say has been your greatest ah-ha with your involvement in a professional learning community?" The participant responded,

> Just maybe things that I have learned that I didn't think I could do, like with the technology that we are doing now. It does make you feel progressive. My kids (her children at home) are wrong. I can do that. I'm going to go home and show them. Growth is good. It can be scary sometimes, but it makes you feel good. (Individual Interview Participant 2)

The continuous learning that is generated from the involvement in a professional learning community stems from the constant engagement in new ideas and strategies that evolves from being around a diverse group of individuals. Interview participant 3 shared, "I like the ah-ha that I get from just being around the new ideas and the new ways and the new techniques." A focus group 2 participant also acknowledged this sentiment by stating, "I don't think we would have read a research based book, maybe looking at idea books is one thing, but to read the research, it does make you have to make the time to do it." She went on to share, "On a professional level some of the books used in PLG made me think about things I have thought about before but never practiced in the classroom."

The platform for continuous learning often requires building the confidence and belief that you can learn. Confidence to try new techniques and strategies is provided through the professional learning community from the support of the members. Several participants commented that without the framework and support of the professional learning community, they would not have attempted new ideas. A sampling of comments include:

> It has encouraged me to grow as a teacher and try new things with my children that I wouldn't have before. (Interview Participant 7)
>
> Without the support of the PLC, you want to pick what you are comfortable with instead of going outside of your boundaries. (Interview Participant 6)

> I think it is so good about study groups that it is ok to go ahead a try something even if you don't have all the answers. (Interview Participant 2)
>
> I think the biggest benefit is just growing in your profession and lots of different ways. Especially me being an older teacher seeing different things that are out there now and having an open mind and saying yeah I can do this and this will be a good thing. (Interview Participant 4)

Continuous learning also requires individuals to explore realms outside of their comfort zone. Interview participant 7 proclaimed,

> All of that (continuous learning) keeps me on my toes and I think that is what the professional learning community helps us all do because not everybody reaches out to do those things on their own. By having that offered here at our school we are all able to do that.

Another participant shared similar remarks,

> This (professional learning community) has helped me to come out of the rut and think about there are different ways to do it instead of doing the same thing year after year. It is more challenging, because you do have to come up with those new things whereas before you could pull something out that you have used before that worked, but it is more exciting for the children and its exciting for me and I continue to learn. (Interview Participant 6)

Time to learn, create, and implement new ideas make up part of the unique structure of a professional learning community. Based on the research of Huffman and Hipp (2003), supporting structures of a professional learning community includes establishing guidelines and procedures that will provide time, physical space, physical proximity, and opportunities

for communication. Several of the participants indicated that without this format, time to research and learn within the school arena would not have occurred.

> I would have never taken the time without the professional study group. We are doing our City group, Wikis, pod casts, and blogs and I couldn't have done that by myself. Never in a million years, but I'm glad I have. Blogging, the parents love it and so it makes me feel better about what I'm doing. (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> I don't think we would have read a research based book, maybe looking at idea books is one thing but to read the research it does make you have to make the time to do it. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

As a closing remark during the interviews, participants were asked, "If I were coming up to you on the side of the street and I knew nothing about professional learning communities and I said, 'I hear you guys are a professional learning community', describe to me in a word or two what that means". One participant immediately responded, "On-going learning for students and staff" (Interview Participant 7). This same response was also voiced by three other participants during the individual interviews.

Professionalism. Continuous learning is an essential element in defining professionalism. Dufour and Eaker (1998) state "that a 'professional' is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base" (p. xi-xii). Senge (1990) believes that "organizations learn only through individuals who learn" (p. 139). Professionalism is therefore defined as people who are steadfast in their commitment to lifelong learning. Senge also deems, "An organization's commitment to and

capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members" (p. 7). Interview participant 6 proclaimed,

> I think just the collaboration and the talking we get to do, whether it is in our vertical planning, or about the book we had or about the study group. Just to be able to talk and analyze what we are doing, what we need as professionals and how we can use that in your classroom, I think that allowed the most growth professionally for me.

Within this context, the professional learning community encouraged people to take an active role in their learning, truly analyzing their individual needs as a professional.

Professionalism, as it pertains to the opportunities for growth, is grounded within the context and framework of a professional learning community. One of the participants proclaimed that the professional learning community establishes opportunities for "leadership and higher expectations that we have to arise to" (Focus Group 2 Participant). Those "expectations push you forward" (Focus Group 2 Participant). Another participant recognized, "We are not forced to be leaders, but you are given the opportunities and you are expected to seek those opportunities" (Interview Participant 1).

Some of the participants explained that their involvement in a professional learning community had inspired them to pursue their masters and/or their National Board Certification.

> I have been working on the National Board this year I have been able to use the things we have learned in professional learning community and without those I would be really digging because that was what the National Board was on, professional growth experiences. You have to do three components so I was able to use all those

> things so I truly know that our school is doing what it needs. I know it has helped me personally. (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> I did National Boards last year and didn't quite make it and I re-did them and I made it this year. But all of that keeps me on my toes and I think that is what the professional learning community helps us all do because not everybody reaches out to do those things on their own. So by having that (professional growth opportunities) offered here at our school we are all able to do that. There are just so many different components here at the school with the study groups, the book studies, the intervention programs, there are just so many different ways for us to grow and help the children that I think it has been a huge benefit and I just think it has really helped my career. (Interview Participant 8)

Change agent. "Professional development becomes a process of change in itself and must address the need to build capacity for change" (InPraxis Group, 2006, p. 22). During all of the individual interviews and focus group interviews, participants told stories of how change had occurred within the organizational structure of the school, instructional practices, and among the individual teachers. When asked what had promoted this change they all indicated that the opportunities to participate in the professional learning community had brought about the positive changes for the school and helped them in growing professionally. One of the participants confirmed,

> To show how effective our professional learning community is, we implemented a new appraisal system, using SmartBoards, and a new writing assessment programs throughout the school. We were able to incorporate it all and work together and I'm not sure that there are many schools out there that could take on so many changes and be able to run with them, I think that is a big difference. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

Participants also indicated that they were willing to learn new ideas because of the opportunities for collaboration, peer review, and support during the implementation phase. Darling-Hammond (1996) avows that instructional change is only implemented when teachers are provided with the opportunities for introduction to theory, demonstration, practice, corrective feedback, and coaching. The dynamics of a professional learning community generates opportunities to explore all aspects of learning and supports the implementation of change. As indicated by interview participant 4, "I think it opens up itself for us all to learn especially the new things that others might be doing differently and see things that we can be doing differently too." Another participant shared, "On math, I feel like we have taken a whole new approach to the way our children are learning because of PLC (professional learning community)" (Focus Group 1 Participant).

Because change is an evolving element of a professional learning community, participants are comfortable with learning and implementing new ideas. As supported by one of the participants from focus group 2, "It creates an openness as to my way is not the only way that there are other good ways."

Research Question 3. Quotes from the focus group and individual interviews that respond to the research question, "Does participation in a professional learning community create continuous and relevant professional development that is sustained?" are provided in this section. Findings from the individual interviews and focus group interviews are organized in the confines of the five identified themes: 1) Collaboration, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Professionalism, and 5) Change Agent.

Collaboration. Based on recent research, "the need to develop collaborative and communicative environments becomes an essential component for success" (InPraxis Group, 2006, p. 22). Two of the participants supported this research stating:

> I think that you are seeing how you can accomplish your goal the best you can while working with other people together. (Interview Participant 5)
>
> The advantage is you are going to improve whatever you are going for if you have everyone on board and you working together and collaborating you are going to achieve better. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

The participants of this study shared that their involvement in a professional learning community had promoted multiple opportunities for professional development primarily because of the collaboration and peer support that is stimulated. Interview participant 3 confirmed, "What has meant most to me is being able to learn from others instead of me having to go through it alone." Senge (1990) importance of collaboration in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*,

> The tools and ideas presented in this book are for destroying the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up this illusion we can build 'learning organizations', organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p. 3)

The ability to work with others promotes a natural learning environment. According to a participant from focus group 2, "We all have learned about each other, we want to share and help each other." Another participant declared, "Professional learning community allows

you to the opportunity to be transparent" (Focus Group 2 Participant). This desire to support and help one another sustains the learning opportunities. "It (professional learning community) forces you to take the time to research and become involved in collaboration. You learn so much more than if you tried doing it on your own" (Interview Participant 5). The opportunities to support one another and share various levels of expertise also broaden the levels of experiences according to a participant from focus group 2:

> Collaboration and being able to work together are great. On my own, I couldn't have learned to do all this. I couldn't have attended enough workshops to do all this. I couldn't have worked hard enough at it. There aren't enough hours at night. But with everybody working together it has made it a lot better.

Another participant insisted that the opportunities for collaboration "cemented" what was learned and enabled people to more readily implement the strategies learned.

> Workshops do not have the opportunity to share everything. I know my first year we all went to a wonderful math workshop, but we didn't have any opportunity to share with anyone else or to even talk about it among ourselves. Now, if you go somewhere you will come back to your group and talk about it and helps you cement what you learned and also we can share it with others too. I decreased a lot in where I go because I'm drawing from the knowledge of everybody else a lot more than feeling like I have to go somewhere else. I have found a wealth of information at our school. Plus it more accessible too. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

Collaboration is a constant reminder to individuals that there is a great deal of knowledge to be explored. For a school to experience success, teachers should understand all facets of the organization.

> Professional learning communities bring you back to reality because I think sometimes you get so focused in your own world that you are sometimes not aware that you might be missing a piece. I think it brings us back to 'wow' you know something you can learn from every grade level. Sometimes it is real hard when you get into own grade level not to remember what the other grade levels are doing. (Focus Group 1 Participant)
>
> That helps us become a team because if you are just working with certain individuals day in and day out you don't even know what is going on in another grade level. I want to know what is going on down stairs and I'm not claiming to know everything that they are doing, but I certainly know it a lot better than if we weren't a professional learning community because there are just so many opportunities for everybody to work with different people in this building. (Interview Participant 4)

Collaboration inspires opportunities for learning. Fogarty and Pete (2009) proclaim, "The implications of professional collaborations are profound. Teachers become interested in what other teachers are doing" (p. 33). This profound interest and desire to learn from others entices teachers' motivation and brings forth meaningful learning.

Meaningful learning. There is a direct correlation between sustainability and meaningful learning. Sustainability according to Webster Dictionary means, "able to be maintained at a certain rate or level" and to sustain is defined as "strengthen or support physically or mentally" (Mac book Computer's Dictionary, 2010). Without meaning or purpose can anything be sustained? The participants involved in this study exclaimed that the information and knowledge that they had gained had meaning and purpose towards achieving their overall goal for improving student achievement. As shared by one

participant, “everyone has the same vision and everyone is a share taker and trying to accomplish that one vision” (Interview Participant 1). For the participants of this professional learning community, all study groups, book studies, vertical alignment, and planning sessions revolve around the school’s vision, which enables them to have purpose and meaning with their professional development. “When we are planning our study groups I’m not so focused on what credits I need to get, we don’t do that at all, we are focused on what our interest are and what the needs of the school” (Focus Group 2 Participant).

Learning from traditional workshops, as defined in Chapter 2, is often not sustained because it has no relevance to the overall needs of the school where the teacher is serving. Interview participant 1 affirmed,

> When you go to a workshop, 90% of the time you go somewhere you get your handouts and you stick them in your book and come back and if you get them back out you may remember one or two things and pull that out. With the study groups and the ongoing learning here, it is something that you are actually using in your classroom or someone else is using it and you can see it done and take it back.

Sustainability for the information learned is cemented because of the ongoing collaboration and actual implementation of the ideas or instructional strategies. Several participants shared comments supporting that the information shared within the professional learning community was meaningful and therefore being used in the classroom. “I feel like what we have done this year surpassed workshops I’ve gone to. I’m actually using the information and feel good about it” (Focus Group 1 Participant).

> Our professional study group chose to work on math. We spent time after we talked about our chapter from our book study and what we learned. We made an active board list. So we actually had the time to create. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

The information being learned in the professional learning community directly correlates with the needs of the school and provides teachers with specific strategies that they can immediately implement in their classroom. This format of meaningful learning ensures that the information will be passed on to the students and supports the school in achieving their vision.

Professionalism. With ongoing collaboration, collegiality, and support that are enabled through a professional learning community, a level of unyielding mutual trust begins to emerge. Teachers begin to see one another not only as colleagues, but also as professionals that have expert knowledge to share. One of the participants unveiled that her involvement in the professional learning community had helped her to grow professionally. This development, in her words occurred because,

> you just learn to know that your colleagues are very apt and able to do what they are doing, and to actually gain ideas from someone. When you are able to share, you learn people do so many good things that if you just have a chance to have time to share and fill those things out and because we are in the same grade level it is appropriate to our curriculum. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

Within this context, teachers become learners and teachers of teachers. Interview participant 7 shared that the professional learning community pushes leadership roles,

> We each have different strengths. We have a person on our team who is very strong in technology, which is really what we are doing now, and she is able to teach us so much and it is a non-threatening atmosphere.

Dufour (2004) stresses that as professionals, teachers must focus on learning and not on the regiments of teaching. Teaching and learning needs to become consistently and continuously interchangeable. Through this process, teachers grow as professionals as supported by interview participant 5, "I think that (professional learning community) has really helped me professionally to even learn as a teacher leader about how to collaborate and communicate with my colleagues."

Learning from one another inspires teachers to "set higher goals for yourself" (Focus Group 2 Participant). Another participant declared,

> I would probably not have done what I have done with technology this year as far as the blog, and that kind of thing, if I hadn't had our study group. Just pushing yourself to do a little more, that's just kind of a motivator that has been good for me. (Interview Participant 4)

In the professional learning community, because of the level of demonstrated professionalism, teachers felt that they could support one another in their individual endeavors towards professional advancement. One of the participants shared how the professional learning community had supported her during her graduate work:

> One semester we had 30 different assignments and I think everybody in the school helped me complete every assignment I had. It wasn't hard for me to do because I had support here and I know other people in my class didn't have it that easy because it (a professional learning community) wasn't happening. (Interview Participant 5)

The level of professionalism instilled through professional learning communities also develops teachers as reflective practitioners. Interview participant 6 shared,

> I think that it, PLC (professional learning community), is real important when you are a teacher because if you think you have all the answers you should get out. There is no way you can know all the answers. Your teaching style needs to change as new things come in to play and more research is done and more data are available.

This level of reflection promotes sustained professional growth.

Continuous learning. Teachers who are reflective practitioners develop an innate desire for continuous learning. Interview participant 6 specifically mentioned how the opportunities for continuous learning created a different level of professionalism and motivation to achieve at higher levels. This inspiration comes from the opportunity to constantly dialogue with colleagues and explore various perspectives.

> I guess that's the big ah-ha moment. It is just a continual learning experience and we all say the words like lifelong learners, but we really understand that. It is so important and there is so much material out there to learn. That it is so updated compared to when I first graduated from college. You need to continue doing learning and it is not only just from a resource of a book, but it helps so much when another person is reading that book because they get something different than you do. I also think that is really helpful for me. With all these different book studies going on it would be very helpful if I could read some of those books that I am reading now with somebody who is teaching reading and just say oh did you see that in that chapter. Wouldn't that be good if we did that" (Interview Participant 6).

The professional dialogue that has occurred as a result of continuous collaboration has, according to the participants in this study, encouraged them to assume leadership roles in determining the professional development needs for the school. During the focus group 1 interview, a participant stated, "I think about it all year. Every time I see something new I think, we could use that for our study group. I think about it throughout the year, what are we going to do the next year." A natural desire to want to learn is developed from the involvement in a professional learning community.

> Building relationships and continuous learning, I think that is what we are doing in professional groups. The things that we do here at school are just helping us learn and expand our own knowledge. I just think they go hand in hand. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

Another participant made a connection for learning between teacher and student stating,

> We, like the children, we are still learning too. We have not stopped learning and I think teachers especially with the twenty first century, we have to be able to change our teaching and be able to meet the needs of those learners and I think we have to learn too. This (professional learning community) gives us the opportunity to learn and to grow. (Interview Participant 1)

Because time is specifically set aside, one participant shared, "You make the time to read the research and do all the new things that you do. That's the end result" (Interview Participant 2). As supported by interview participant 4, that end result makes

> it more challenging because you do have to come up with those new things, but its more exciting for the children and it is exciting for me and I continue to learn also as I'm doing new things to try to teach them.

Another participant shared that with this constant challenge and opportunity to learn new information "we are always pushed to go outside of our comfort zone" (Focus Group 1 Participant).

Change agent. This push to go outside of their comfort zone, which was discussed by many of the participants during both the individual interviews and focus group interviews, promotes the constant need for reflection and change within the educational setting. One participant indicated,

> It has been beneficial for me just in having to look a little deeper at how we do things or think about different ways of doing things that without the push to learn we'll get caught in a rut and we think well this is fine, just leave it alone instead of trying to make things better. (Interview Participant 8)

The supporting attributes and physical support structures of a professional learning community "forces you to take the time to research and become involved and make changes" (Focus Group 1). The underlying premise of the change theory supports that teachers must have ownership in the process of change in order for the change to be sustainable. Tam (2009), author of a recent study that focuses on change in schools, suggests "that the sufficient conditions for sustainable instructional changes within a school are an authentic professional learning community among the teachers" (p. 315).

The sufficient conditions that Tam revealed in his study included various aspects of time and opportunities for collaboration. Constant availability for collegial collaboration promotes and sustains educational reform. Fogarty and Pete (2009) share that "when support is visible, available, and accessible all day, every day, the rate of success for implementing new initiatives increases phenomenally" (p. 33). During the first focus group interview, a

participant revealed that being a part of a professional learning community

> makes change come easier. We have an opportunity to do it together. We are all changing together, and you are collaborating and you say, 'Hey this is what I did with this oh wow.' Learning together you are growing together. (Focus Group 1 Participant)

The collaborative nature of the professional learning community at this school has, according to the participant, created the right environment to support sustainable change.

With the constant opportunities for reflection and research, professional learning community participants more readily recognize the need for change. "If a something comes down from the state, a change, we are already doing it" (Focus Group 2 Participant). This recognition and acceptance of change encourages and promotes the opportunities for continuous and sustained learning. Interview participant 7 simply reiterated, "A professional learning community is just a team learning together to make improvement for your school."

Summary

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of whether or not teachers perceived professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. This chapter has provided an analysis of the results from the data as presented from the Professional Learning Community Assessment, participant observations, group interviews, and individual interviews.

Supported by research findings from the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the five themes that emerged from the data provided a comprehensible framework for this study to understand the teachers' perceptions as they relate to professional growth opportunities. Based on the data collected, there is strong evidence to support that

teachers do perceive professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. Shared by a participant in focus group 1, “My ah-ha moment is thank goodness I’m having this opportunity. It has been the most beneficial thing I’ve ever done.” A more detailed summary and a discussion of the findings are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for ongoing and effective professional growth. Data collection for this study included teachers' responses to the Professional Learning Community Assessment (Oliver, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003), participant observations field notes, focus group interviews and individual interviews transcripts. To provide focus for this research, the following questions were developed and explored:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities?
2. Are professional learning communities perceived by teachers as opportunities for professional growth?
3. Does participation in a professional learning community create continuous and relevant professional development that is sustained?

In this chapter, a brief overview of the findings from this study are provided. The five themes that surfaced while analyzing the findings using the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) serve as the framework for the discussion. A detailed discussion summarizes the findings in relation to each of the corresponding themes as they correlate with the research questions. Findings, as they relate to the current research regarding professional learning communities, are also addressed and the overriding implications ascertained from the study are discussed. A review of the limitations of the

study is presented and opportunities for further studies are discussed. Final conclusions drawn from the study are included.

Analysis

As discussed in previous chapters, the voice of teachers with regard to professional learning communities was missing from the current research. This study examined the perceptions of teachers in regards to professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. Teachers are the focal point for institutionalizing sustainable educational reform. The pivotal point of educational reform revolves on the opportunities for professional growth of teachers. Darling-Hammond (1998) suggests, "Professional development is at the center of the practice of improvement. It is the process by which we organize the development and use of new knowledge in the service of improvement" (p. 7). It is because of the process of change inspired by professional development that the capacity to understand the need for change within the educational system evolves.

Effective professional development serves as the backbone for creating the optimum educational environment for students. Darling-Hammond (1998) writes, "The quality of a teacher is the most important predictor of student success" (p.10). Therefore, it is imperative that educators unveil the most significant opportunities and strategies that promote professional development for teachers. Dufour and Eaker (1998) state, "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (p. xi). The overall findings of this study support, from teachers' perspectives, that professional learning communities do indeed promote and sustain ongoing professional growth.

Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data from this study, multiple themes emerged. Using the process of selective coding, five overriding themes surfaced: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, and 5) Change Agent. From the participant observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews, five themes emerged that described and defined the framework for their professional learning community. The emerging themes support the definition of a professional learning community as depicted by McLaughlin and Talbert's (2006) research: "Teachers work collaboratively to reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes" (p. 4).

Throughout the interviewing and observation process, participants shared multiple stories of opportunities for collaboration and peer support that was provided from the framework of the professional learning community. The research supporting professional learning community reveals the relevance of collaboration. Fullan (1993) suggests, "Without the collaborative skills and relationships, it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need to know to improve school" (p. 17-18). One participant from the study shared, "a professional learning community forces you to take the time to research and become involved in collaboration. You learn so much more than if you tried doing it on your own" (Interview Participant 4). The collaborative culture, which serves as the foundation for a professional learning community, inspires educators to bring together their expertise, knowledge, and enthusiasm in an effort to learn from one another with a vision of improving student achievement. Many (as cited in Erkens et al., 2008) states that "members of a professional learning community recognize they cannot accomplish their fundamental

purpose of high levels of learning for all students unless they work together collaboratively" (p. 57). The participants of this study echoed Many and Fullan during the interviews and observations. A participant from focus group 2 shared

> that collaboration and being able to work together is critical. On my own I couldn't have learned to do all these things. I couldn't have attended enough workshops to do all this. I couldn't have worked hard enough. But with everybody working together it has made it a lot better.

Participants espoused that the collaboration and support that they received from participating in a professional learning community had provoked and inspired change and growth as individuals and as a school. The participants also shared that the focus of the collaboration on the overall vision for the school made a significant impact on student learning. Sparks (2002) avows that effective professional development "is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers, and between teachers and principals, in solving important problems related to teaching and learning" (p. 4). During the focus group 1 interview, a participant declared, "We are working together. Everyone having the same vision and everyone is a share taker and trying to accomplish that one vision of student success". Servage's (2008) research supports this response stating, "Collaborative teacher learning calls participants to develop a strong sense of community, the glue of which is collective responsibility for student learning" (p. 64). Participants revealed that the collaboration and peer support that occurs from their active participation in a professional learning community constantly promoted opportunity for sustained, ongoing professional development that supported change initiatives which supported improving the overall educational environment for their students.

The collaborative environment also inspires a desire for sustained, continuous professional development. Many of the participants shared that their involvement in the professional learning community instituted a thirst for learning. Interview participant 2 enthusiastically declared, "I like the ah-ha I get from just being around the new ideas and the new ways and the new techniques." According to Dufour (2004), this thirst for knowledge surfaces as a result of the school's ability to focus on learning rather than teaching. Within the framework of a professional learning community, the roles of teacher and learner are constantly in transference. The teacher is the learner and the learner is the teacher. Thompson et al. (2004) believes that student learning will improve when teachers are also involved in learning activities. The participants in this study supported the research stating, "Things are changing rapidly, especially with the twenty first century skills. If you don't change things and learn how to incorporate some ideas you will be left behind. When you are left behind, your children are left behind" (Interview Participant 4). Twadell (as cited in Erkens et al. (2008) avows, "Continuous improvement in the professional learning community is not last year's initiative, it is an every year's initiative" (p. 114).

Learning in a collaborative and continuous environment is created because it is meaningful to the participants. During the study, participants disclosed on numerous occasions that the professional development opportunities meant something to them because the issues were relevant to the needs of their school and to their individual need for growth. Participants from focus group 2 proclaimed, "The PLG meets our needs as a school rather than a broad workshop." "You are just not being told. You process it and think, 'How will it work in the classroom?' It is your product to use in your classroom because you have created it." This level of connectivity instills in the participants a reason to learn and change.

According to Webster's Dictionary, meaningful is to "have a serious, important, or useful quality or purpose" (Mac book Computer Dictionary, 2010). The participants of this professional learning community support the definition of meaningful.

One participant shared,

> People have an interest in what they are studying about and if you are passionate about what you want to do you are going to buy into it. I think that is why it is really helpful that we get to sort of direct our own way or direct our choice of what we want to do for our study groups and I think that is how you get people to buy into it and then you see results. (Interview Participant 5)

A professional learning community is purpose driven. The participants fully understand the vision and the goals and everyone works together to achieve success for their students. This purpose driven inspiration was supported when one participant shared, "There is just so much that we are all working together for the good of the school for the good of the students. I think that is what makes us that special team that we are here" (Interview Participant 7).

Research on effective professional development stresses the need for meaningful and relevant learning. According to a comprehensive study of recent research of effective professional development conducted by the InPraxis Group (2006), "Professional development is centered in the school community and based on teachers' identified needs. It occurs within the context of the school community and involves people resources and models that include mentoring and community building" (p. 44). Professional learning communities create a natural environment where meaningful, collaborative learning continuously occurs between and amongst colleagues who are focused on the same inherit goal, student learning.

Interview participant 7 avowed,

> There, (workshops) they are kind of feeding it to us, here we are all building it together. We are building that knowledge together. I think it is much, much more meaningful what we do here at our school versus a workshop.

The level of meaning found in a professional learning community instills a sense of empowerment, purpose, and accountability. Members of the professional learning community see the need and aspire to make the changes that are needed to promote student achievement and professional growth for themselves and their colleagues.

The level of accountability established in a professional learning community also instigates a higher level of professionalism. A focus group 2 participant shared, "Something big was expectations, leadership and expectations we have to arise to." The structure of the professional learning community creates a natural link to empowerment. Teachers aspire to grow within the profession and develop an inspiration to share their knowledge and expertise with their colleagues in a non-threatening environment. Interview participant 5 shared, "I think that it (professional learning community) has really helped me professionally to even learn as a teacher leader about how to collaborate and communicate."

Erkens et al. (2008) declares that teachers involved in a professional learning community become leaders because "they are passionate in their drive for excellence, and they are inspiring in their willingness, even eagerness, to transform their own classrooms, and personal practice as they work daily to transform the lives of their students" (p. 27). This sentiment was echoed in many of the interviews conducted during the study. Interview participant 4 acknowledged, "Just pushing yourself to do a little more. That's just kind of a motivator that it (professional learning community) has been good for me." A focus group 2

participant stated, “PLC (professional learning community) sets higher expectations, pushes you forward as you might not have known about before.”

The participants shared that they felt an increased sense of accountability to their peers. “You are accountable to your colleagues and the people who are more important at your side” (Focus Group 1 Participant). This level of accountability is intensified because it is ultimately the responsibility of the participants to create, support, and provide the opportunities for professional growth that are relevant to the needs of the students they serve. The opportunity to create and construct an understanding for the instructional concepts and strategies develops a natural process for implementation into the classroom. During the focus group 2 interview, one of the participants espoused that professional learning communities

> benefit students more. You are the one developing it and you are just not being told. You process it and think how will it work in the classroom? It’s your product to use in your classroom because you have created it.

Conzemius and O’Neill (2002) report that a professional learning community increases the capacity for leadership by developing opportunities for participation in learning and improvement. “Leadership capacity is achieved when there is a dynamic interaction of focus, reflection, and collaboration” (p. 12). This definition for leadership capacity was championed when interview participant 3 insisted, “PLCs (professional learning communities) teach us how to analyze and determine what we need to grow professionally, and we take responsibility in our own learning.”

The increased level of responsibility and ownership creates a capacity and understanding for the need for change. Interview participant 3 shared that her involvement had helped her to develop an openness and willingness to change.

> In the past, I have been set in my ways and if it isn't broken, don't fix it or try to fix it. I have learned to look other ways that I might not have thought were very beneficial before, but kind of an openness as to my way is not the only way that there are other good ways.

During the study, one of the revealing themes that emerged was professional learning community as a change agent. In order to fully implement change in any organization there has to be an understanding of the need for change and the ownership in the process of change. Fullan (2006) states, "If you want to change systems, you need to increase the amount of purposeful interaction between and among individuals" (p. 116). In a study conducted by Tam (2009) it was found that collaborative structures within an organization promote opportunities for sustainable and ongoing change. The study revealed that "the collaborative culture builds on qualities of openness, trust, and support among teachers, and acknowledges the wider dimensions of teachers' learning and development, so that the borders between in school and out of school are blurred" (p. 329). The foundation of a professional learning community supports the collaborative environment that promotes sustainable change. A participant in focus group 1 supported the concept of the professional learning community as a collaborative culture that sustains change when she proclaimed, "It makes change come easier. We have an opportunity to do it together. We are all changing together." Another participant shared,

> To show how effective our professional learning community is, we implemented a new appraisal system, using SmartBoards, and implemented new writing assessment programs throughout the whole school. We were able to incorporate it all and work together and I'm not sure that there are many schools out there that could take so much change and be able to run with it, I think that is a big difference. (Focus Group 2 Participant)

The collaborative culture that serves as the foundation, opens the window of opportunities for participation to engage in the process of change. This process is substantiated with the continuous support and trust that is promoted within the context of collegial collaboration that is focused on an overriding vision for improved student achievement. Owston (2007) confirmed, "Sustainability begins with moral purpose, the idea that individuals must be committed to improving not only their own area of responsibility, but must be dedicated to transforming the larger organization" (p. 65). Interview participant 7 affirmed, "A professional learning community is just a team learning together to make improvement for your school."

Many of the participants shared new ideas and concepts that they were able to implement because of their involvement in the professional learning community. They compared professional learning communities and traditional workshops and described the opportunities for substantive change that are created from their participation in the professional learning community.

> We are more involved in our learning here at the school. When you go to a workshop it is more like they present information to you. There they are kind of feeding it to us,

here we are all building it together, we are building that knowledge together. (Interview Participant 7)

The overall findings of this study indicate that teachers do perceive professional learning communities as opportunities for professional development that is relevant to their individual growth and focused on the overall goal of student achievement. Evidence supports the findings of Dufour and Eaker (1998), "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (p. xi).

Many of the teachers shared that implementation of the professional learning community was a difficult and time consuming process, but that it was well worth it because of the benefits that it provides for teachers and ultimately their students. Interview participant 6 declared, "It is well worth it. We do need to grow and this way we are growing in a way that is usable for us. It is not staff development in name only, it is appropriate to our needs and our students' needs." Professional learning creates opportunities for institutionalized school reform by empowering teachers with leadership capacity through professional growth opportunities that are created from continuous collaboration, support, and meaningful learning. As Morrissey (2000) contends, "Unlike the past attempts to improve education, a PLC (professional learning community) is not a package of skills or a short-term program to implement, but an entirely new way for schools to function" (p. 12).

The findings of this study provide leaders with the opportunity to hear teachers' voices in regards to their involvement in a professional learning community. The voices of the teachers involved in this study speak loudly proclaiming that professional learning communities provide ongoing, sustainable opportunities for professional growth that improves student learning.

Study Limitations

The overall design of this qualitative study included certain limitations. One limitation may have been my knowledge and work with professional learning communities. Over the past several years, I have not only been an active member of a professional learning community, but also the facilitator for two professional learning communities. I have provided professional development opportunities for educators with a focus on the implementation of professional learning communities. This level of previous involvement and knowledge of professional learning communities could have ultimately skewed the interpretation of the data because of my biases and beliefs. Several actions described in Chapter 3 were taken to address this potential limitation.

Also a high level of focus on the research question was maintained. I truly wanted to know whether or not teachers felt that professional learning communities were a viable way of promoting professional growth. If teachers do not support the concept, there is no value in promoting the development of professional learning communities. I wanted to be able to determine, based on teachers' perceptions, if professional learning communities were viable opportunities for professional growth.

The case study design of this research limits the overall application of the results to other settings. However, findings from this study, provide an in-depth understanding for educational leaders who are seeking to better understand the perceptions of teachers in regards to professional development as linked to professional learning communities. The findings provide educational leaders with insight from the teachers' perspectives, which is a powerful tool when trying to gain support during the implementation phase. The information

obtained during this study could be used to support the implementation of a professional learning community for teachers in similar school settings.

Implications

While a single case study cannot provide a pervasive basis for the implementation of a professional learning community, it does have supporting implications for several perspective audiences. The overall findings of this study support the most current research. Dufour (2007) states that

> the professional learning community concept does not offer a short cut to school reform. It presents neither a program nor a recipe. It does provide a powerful, proven conceptual framework for transforming schools at all levels, but alas, even the grandest design eventually degenerates into hard work. A school staff must focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. When educators do the hard work necessary to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn inevitably will rise. (p. 7)

To promote substantive school reform that will impact student learning, it is imperative that educational leaders begin the process of implementing changes that will support ongoing professional growth for teachers. Colleges and universities should also investigate strategies for fostering leadership programs that mimic professional learning communities. Development of these programs could provide aspiring leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to implement professional learning communities in the schools where they serve. Teacher education programs would benefit from the implementation of professional learning communities within their departments. These opportunities could

provide an ongoing support structure for beginning teachers and help prepare them to successfully enter the field of education. Educational leaders could also benefit from the development of professional learning communities within their school district. Development of a professional learning community for administrators could provide support and opportunities to continuously explore research based strategies that improve student learning.

Professional learning communities provide all of the ingredients recommended for effective professional development (Guskey, 2003; InPraxis Group, 2006; Sparks, 2002). As revealed from the data collected during this study, teachers perceived that the professional learning community, at this site, supported collaboration, peer support, meaningful and relevant learning, empowerment, and promoted change. Based on current research (InPraxis Group, 2006), effective professional development must contain all of these elements. Nathan (2008) asserts,

> Teachers must have structured time to share, write, and talk about their teaching and their students. Otherwise, teaching is a solitary activity, all too often leading to unsatisfactory results for both teachers and students. A school with a healthy professional learning community will maintain a razor-sharp focus on student achievement; its faculty will feel a common ownership and responsibility for that achievement; and its students will achieve success. (p. 2)

The findings of this study contribute to the field of education by sharing teachers' perspectives about how their professional learning community has positively impacted their ability to grow as professionals and how it inevitability impacted their ability to provide a better education for the students they serve. Creating a more effective and beneficial professional growth plan for teachers is vital in creating educational environments that

support school improvement. Teachers are at the forefront of educational reforms; therefore educational leaders should aspire to improve the opportunities for professional development. Insights obtained from this research provide support for the implementation of professional learning communities as an effective route towards school improvement.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study indicate multiple opportunities for other possible research studies in regards to professional learning communities and professional development of teachers. More case studies investigating teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities conducted in different grade level configurations and more diversity in the student and staff populations would strengthen the validity and reliability of this study.

During the course of the interviewing process, several participants mentioned the role of the principal and the impact that she had on the success of the professional development. They implied the principal's leadership in the process of implementation enabled them to take on leadership roles that promoted a sense of ownership. Participants also talked about the characteristics of the principal that had supported them in the process of growing to become a professional learning community.

Future studies which investigate the role of the leader in the sustainment, implementation, and the correlation with the success of professional develop as it corresponds to professional learning communities could provide additional insights for educational leaders. Investigating leaders' perceptions of professional learning communities could provide valuable insight for other leaders aspiring to implement the framework for a professional learning community.

Throughout the interviewing process, the participants discussed the various phases of implementation that were experienced. The participants shared how the professional learning community was started and the trials and tribulations that were experienced during the implementation phase. Currently, there is insignificant research that describes the process and stages of development for a professional learning community. Further research that describes the stages of implementation would provide support and assistance for leaders. This type of research could help future leaders avoid some of the deterrents that would prevent a successful implementation of a professional learning community.

The teachers involved in this study discussed the impact that the professional learning community had on student achievement. This discussion opens another opportunity for further research to determine if there is a direct correlation between student achievement and the implementation of a professional learning community. There is limited research that provides specific data supporting a correlation.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, teachers perceive professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. The emerging themes: 1) Collaboration/ Peer Support, 2) Continuous Learning, 3) Meaningful Learning, 4) Increased Professionalism, and 5) Change Agent support recent research on effective professional development and professional learning communities.

Teachers are the defining factor for school improvement. Schools should implement professional growth opportunities that will inspire and support opportunities for continuous growth. Based on the findings of this study, it is my hope that other educational leaders will join the journey in implementing professional learning communities. It is imperative that

teachers' professional growth be supported within the structure and foundation of the school environment. Professional learning communities offer the framework and foundation for promoting professional growth of teachers and creating sustainable school improvement.

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APPENDIX A

Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA),
Oliver, Hipp, and Huffman (2003)

Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA)

Directions:
This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the five dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. There are no right or wrong responses. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices that occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement.

Key Terms:
Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal
Staff = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students
Stakeholders = Parents and community members

Scale:
1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)
2 = Disagree (D)
3 = Agree (A)
4 = Strongly Agree (SA)

Shared and Supportive Leadership

1. The staff are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

3. The staff have accessibility to key information.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

5. Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.
   _____SD _____A
   _____D _____SA

10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

Shared Values and Vision

11. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

12. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

13. The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

14. Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

15. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

16. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

17. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

18. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

Collective Learning and Application

19. The staff work together to seek knowledge skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

20. Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

21. The staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student need.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

22. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

23. The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

24. Professional development focus on teaching and learning.
    _____SD _____A

_____D _____SA

25. School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

26. School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

Shared Personal Practice

27. Opportunities exist for staff to observe peer and offer encouragement.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

28. The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

29. The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

30. The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

31. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

32. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

Supportive Conditions – Relationships

33. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

34. A culture of trust and respect exist for taking risks.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

35. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

36. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

Supportive Conditions – Structures

37. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

38. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

39. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

40. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

41. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

42. The school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

43. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

44. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

45. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.
    _____SD _____A
    _____D _____SA

APPENDIX B

Participant Information Letter

Appalachian State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Studies Program

Study: Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Opportunities for Professional Growth

My name is Julie Morrow and I am currently a doctoral student at Appalachian State University. You have been invited to participate in a study of teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities. Your participation is very valuable to the study and will help in determining the overall effectiveness of professional learning communities in regards to opportunities for professional growth. You have been specifically invited to participate because of your current involvement in a professional learning community. The insights that you can provide will assist in developing a thorough understanding of teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities. By sharing your experiences, you will also have the opportunity to reflect on the impact that professional learning communities have had on you as a teacher.

Responses from the focus group and interviews will be used as a part of a research project however; your participation in the study and responses to the questions will be kept anonymous. Your identity and involvement in the study will not be revealed at any time. Each participant, the name of the school and the school district will be assigned a pseudo name for the purpose of research. This allows you to share your honest feelings about professional learning communities. It is imperative to the study that all of your responses reflect how you truly feel.

Over the course of several weeks, I will spend time talking with you about your insights and perceptions of professional learning communities. Focus groups will be

conducted consisting of approximately 14 participants from your school. During the focus group, the group will be asked questions regarding professional learning communities. The focus group will last no longer than 1 and ½ hours.

Individual interviews with some of the focus group participants will also be conducted at a later time. The interviews will be held at a time that is convenient for you and your schedule. The interview session will last no longer than an hour. During the interview, I will ask general questions about your participation in a professional learning community. For documentation purposes, I will take notes during the interviews and will ask permission to record our conversations.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions that will be asked. Your impressions, reflections, and thoughtful answers are very important to the study. I want to gain an in-depth understanding of your perceptions of professional learning community and whether or not it has impacted you as a teacher in the area of professional growth.

Your participation is valuable, however you can decide at any time that you do not want to participate in the study and I will respect your decision. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in the study.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please review and sign the informed consent that is attached to this letter. After signing the informed consent, please return it to me in the stamped envelope that is enclosed. I have attached the schedule for the focus groups. Two dates are listed for the focus groups and dates are also listed for the individual interviews. Thank you so much for your willingness to consider participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Julie R. Morrow

APPENDIX C
Participant Consent Form

Appalachian State University
Educational Leadership Doctoral Studies Program
Informed Consent

Study: Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Opportunities for Professional Growth

1. Julie R. Morrow (jm49469@appstate.edu) doctoral student under the supervision of Dr. Ken McEwin, (mcewinck@appstate.edu), is requesting your participation in a research study entitled, Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Opportunities for Professional Growth. The purpose of the study is to examine and gain insight into whether or not teachers view their participation in a professional learning community as an opportunity that promotes and encourages professional development.
2. A group of teachers from your school will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion. You may also be asked to participate in individual interviews at a later date.
3. If at any time during the study you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions please feel free to decline a response or stop the interview. The design of the study has been created to minimize the risk to any participant.
4. The findings of such a study would contribute to the field of education by creating a more effective and beneficial professional growth plan for teachers. The insight obtained through this research could also provide vital information addressing the need for continuous teacher education.
5. The results of the study will be published in my dissertation however; the names of

the participants, the school, and the school district will not be revealed in the study. For the purpose of the study, pseudo names will be assigned by the researcher to the school, school district, and all participants. Names will not be revealed by the researcher at any time. All transcripts and data collected will be kept in a secured area available only to the researcher.

6. Any questions about the study should be referred to Julie R. Morrow or Dr. Ken McEwin. Email addresses are listed above.
7. Your participation in the study is voluntary and will not be compensated. At anytime during the study you are free to withdraw from the study.

Participant's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____Date_____

Participant's Signature

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Julie R. Morrow – (704-664-7814) – jm49469@appstate.edu
Investigator Telephone/e-mail

Dr. Ken McEwin - mcewinck@appstate.edu
Faculty Advisor e-mail

Jay W. Cranston, MD 828-262-2692 irb@appstate.edu
Administrator, IRB Telephone e-mail

APPENDIX D
Focus Group Script

Focus Group Script

JM: I would like to thank you for attending this focus group interview session today. My name is Julie Morrow and I will serve as the moderator for today. I realize your time is valuable, and I appreciate you taking time to assist me with my dissertation research. This focus group interview is an informal method of sharing your thoughts and ideas in regards to Professional Learning Communities.

JM: This is _____; she will serve as my proxy for the interview. To ensure your candid response and to avoid any bias, she will help me conduct the interviews. My role as moderator is to guide the discussion and ask questions. Please feel free to talk to each other. There are no wrong answers so please share your thoughts and ideas. Today's conversation will be video taped and recorded. No names will be used in my research

JM: I am going to ask some informal questions in order to get your perceptions about professional learning communities and professional development. The concepts of professional learning communities that we will discuss are based on the five dimensions (shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions) and related attributes. I want to find out what you think about professional learning communities as an opportunity for professional development.

JM: Let's take a few minutes and introduce yourselves so that I can be on a first name basis with you.

Guidelines - (Kruger, 1998; Morgan, 1997)

Some things that will help our discussion go more smoothly are:

1. Only one person should speak at a time.
2. Please avoid side conversations
3. Everyone needs to participants and no one should dominate the conversation
4. The focus group will last no longer than 2 hours, many of you have cell phones, please avoid using your cell phones during this time. If at all possible please turn off your cell phones. If you need to keep your cell phone on, please put it on vibrate and leave the room if you need to take a call.

Guiding Questions for Focus Group Discussion

1. Talk about the opportunities that you have experienced as a result of being a part of a professional learning community. Have these experiences helped you grow professionally?
2. What does professional development look like in your school?
3. Has being a part of a professional learning community made a difference for you as a professional? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that you would have experienced the same opportunities without the organization of the professional learning community at your school? Why or why not?
5. Talk about professional development at Augustus Elementary School. Has the approach to professional development changed since the implementation of professional learning communities? If so, how?

6. Talk about the opportunities for professional growth your school

   *If someone indicates collaborative relationships ask:

   - How do staff members go about collaborating with each other?

7. Do you think the school has improved during the past two years? If so, how? What has taken place?
8. Have you grown as a professional since your involvement with professional learning community? Why or why not? *If yes…* Can you provide some examples that would support that would demonstrate that you have grown?

Thank you for your time today!! ☺

Possible Probing Questions (Kruger, 1998; Morgan, 1997)

1. Would you explain further?
2. Can you provide an example?
3. Please describe what you mean?
4. Can you clarify? I want to make sure that I understand.
5. One thing that I have heard several people mention is _____. I am curious as to what the rest of the group thinks about that.
6. Are there any other thoughts that have occurred to you?

APPENDIX E
Individual Interview Questions

Guiding Individual Interview Questions

1. How would you describe a professional learning community?
2. What are your perceptions of the professional study groups that you have participated in at your school?
3. What have been some of the topics of your professional study groups? How were the topics determined? Were the topics beneficial to your growth as a professional? Why or why not?
4. Tell me about something that you learned from your participation in a professional learning community? Did it make a difference in your teaching? Explain your response.
5. Tell me about an “aha” moment that you experienced during your participation in your professional learning community? Why was it an "aha" moment?
6. Do you think that you have grown professionally from your participation in the professional learning community? Will you explain your response?
7. What advantages and disadvantages have you experienced from your participation in the professional learning community?
8. Has your involvement in professional learning community changed your perceptions of teaching and learning? If so, how and why?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julie R. Morrow attended Beaver Creek High School in West Jefferson, North Carolina graduating 1985. The following fall, she entered Mars Hill College where she graduated Cum Laude in 1989 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education.

In August of 1989, she began teaching at Park View Elementary School. While teaching school, she attended the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and in 1996 received her Masters in Elementary Education. During her teaching tenure, she was awarded Teacher of the Year for Park View in 1993 and then again in 1996. Mooresville Graded School District recognized her as their Teacher of the Year in 1996.

Upon completing her ninth year as a teacher, she was awarded a North Carolina Principal Fellows Scholarship. She attended the University of North Carolina for two years and completed her Master of School Administration in May 2000. Immediately following completion of her MSA, she began serving as a principal in Alexander County. In the fall of 2001, she began work on her Education Specialist Degree at Appalachian State University and graduated in May 2003. In the fall of 2004, she began work on her doctorate at Appalachian State University and completed her degree in 2010. She has served as the principal at Mooresville Intermediate School in Mooresville, North Carolina since 2005. During this time she was awarded Principal of the Year for the Mooresville School District in 2008 and was the Northwest Region runner up for Principal of the Year.