PERCEPTIONS OF DISTRICT LEADERS, SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, AND TEACHERS REGARDING THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNING

by

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This qualitative multiple case study explored what district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers in a large southeastern school district in the United States thought about participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLC)s as a form of professional learning for teachers. One common method of professional development over the last decade is the Professional Learning Communities. Learning communities are popular as a way to support student achievement; however, there is limited research to show how teachers learn as a result of participating in professional learning communities. There is also limited research to support this type of professional development as effective professional development in the high school setting. My study helped to fill the gap by looking at whether this method of professional development supports adult learning and creates a change in classroom practice. The study was conducted in one school system that had created a strategic plan for continuous school improvement involving the mandatory use of professional learning communities in its schools. The system had a sustained 7-year effort and provided time and resources for the professional learning communities. The participants included four district leaders, five administrators, and three focus groups consisting of 25 total teachers. Data analysis was conducted at two different levels, within each individual case and across the three cases. Individual case analysis was conducted for three cases: (1) district leaders; (2) high
school administrators; and (3) high school teachers. For each case, themes and subthemes emerged. A cross-case analysis of the three cases revealed similarities and differences among the three individual cases. Four themes emerged from the cross-case analysis: (1) administrator responsibility; (2) attitude; (3) collaboration; and (4) authentic learning. The four themes presented a description of how professional learning communities support adult learning. Because of this qualitative study, school districts and administrators may have a better understanding of how to structure their professional learning communities to support adult learning for their teachers.

Keywords: professional development, professional learning communities, adult learning
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my husband Steve, my children Haley and Will, and my mother Jackie. It is also dedicated to my friends who have chosen the most noble profession of all—education.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I first acknowledge my Savior, Jesus Christ. Through Him all things are possible.

I also thank my wonderful husband Steve for always supporting me in every way possible, my children Haley and Will for saying “Mom, you’ve got this!” and my mother Jackie for telling me how important an education truly is. I hope I made you all proud.

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I also thank the educators with whom I have worked throughout my career. Your dedication and commitment to children inspires me and continually touches our future.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Educators at all levels must continually prepare for the implementation of new instructional practices in order to meet changing curriculum standards and numerous educational reforms (Cuban, 1996; Friedman & Phillips, 2004; Fullan, 1999; Little & Houston, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1999). As a continual effort to improve student achievement, school leaders find themselves pressured to provide effective professional development training for their teachers that will ensure student growth (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Webster-Wright, 2009). Current researchers suggest effective professional development occurs when teachers collaborate with one another in a learning environment (Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Research findings assert that effective professional development stems from aligning with teachers’ beliefs and focusing on the professional learner (Garet et al., 2001; Hirsh & Hord, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). However, the method by which adults learn makes determining the kind of professional development programs needed difficult (Merriam, 2001a, 2001b). Exploring what educators in a K-12 setting think about the Professional Learning Community as a model of professional growth can be beneficial to individuals planning for high quality professional development that will foster teacher learning.
Statement of the Problem

Regardless of how burdensome and difficult it might be for educational leaders to provide professional development opportunities to their teachers, effective professional development is an essential means by which schools ensure students’ academic achievement (Borko, 2004; Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Fullan, 2001; Gordon, 2004). Therefore, it becomes imperative to develop a model that benefits the teacher as an adult learner in order for classroom practices to change (Mouza, 2006; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). An extensive review of the professional development literature for teachers revealed that one characteristic of effective professional development is to focus on both the teaching and learning of specific content by the teachers (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Adamson, 2010).

Experts differentiate between professional development and professional learning for teachers; professional learning for teachers is defined as acquiring expertise, proficiency, methods, and the proclivity to learn (Mindich & Lieberman 2012). Professional development can be defined as an activity that may lead to professional learning (Wei et al., 2009). Professional development for teachers attempts to increase teacher professional knowledge and change classroom practice; however, there is little empirical evidence that teacher learning occurs during professional development activities (Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003). Placing educators in environments where they continually learn as adults, however, is associated with improvement in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Guskey, 2000; Wei et al., 2009).

One model of professional development that has been popular over the last 12 years is the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs have gained
popularity as a means of effective professional development to enhance student achievement (Bezzina, 2006; Eaker, Richard DuFour, & Rebecca DuFour, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Richard DuFour, Eaker, & Rebecca DuFour, 2005, 2008; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004). The essential aspect of any learning community is a continued focus on student learning and achievement that is realized when groups of teachers work collaboratively to accomplish an accepted set of goals (Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Currently, it is common practice to promote teacher collaboration in a PLC environment (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). In efforts to promote collaboration in a PLC format, it is useful to set guidelines and establish procedures for the formation and development of the PLC in a school setting (DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012; Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2009). Although evidence suggests teachers benefit from working in such a collaborative way, research findings also suggest that accomplishing this level of collaboration among teachers is often an arduous task (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012).

Research findings support that in order for professional development activities to benefit teachers, teachers must acquire knowledge. Existing literature also suggests PLCs are a worthwhile model of professional development for promoting student achievement. However, a paucity in the literature exists regarding how teachers learn as adults and grow as professionals while participating in PLCs. Since PLCs represent a method of professional development touted as an effective means of promoting student achievement, determining whether a link occurs between this method of professional development and teacher learning is paramount to ascertaining the influence on student achievement.
Research is needed to help educational leaders at the school and district level recognize how to better structure their PLCs to become true agents of adult learning.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers in a large school district in the southeastern part of the United States thought about participating in PLCs as a form of professional learning for teachers. A PLC was defined as a group consisting of at least three high school teachers who met regularly to examine student data, analyze student work, discuss current best teaching practices, design valuable lessons, and develop common assessments that monitored student progress. Professional learning was defined as the way educators gained knowledge and developed skills that enabled them to support the learning needs of students (Wei et al., 2009). This multiple case study was designed to explore how district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers perceived PLCs as a means of professional learning.

**Research Questions**

Research questions guide a study by offering purpose, prescribing limits, and presenting a means of evaluation (Hatch, 2002). Creswell (2007) recommended focusing research around one general question and several sub-questions.
Central Research Question

The central question for this multiple case study was as follows:

Do professional learning communities support high school teachers’ professional learning?

Sub-questions. The following sub-questions guided the research in this study:

1) Do district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers view participation in a PLC as a means of teachers’ professional growth?
2) Does participation in a PLC impact thinking about professional growth and professional development?
3) To what extent does participation in a PLC impact classroom teaching?
4) Are there benefits to teachers from participating in PLCs?
5) What difficulties arise for teachers while participating in PLCs?
6) How do district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers perceive their role in ensuring professional learning occurs while participating in a PLC?

Theoretical Framework

In keeping with Creswell’s (2009, 2013) recommendation of clarifying a theoretical framework in the beginning of the research process, I framed my study around Knowles’ theory of adult learning. Adult learning theories provide a structure for understanding how adults may learn differently from children and adolescents (Trotter, 2006). Adult learning is more than a single cognitive process; it encompasses many levels and
occurs in many situations (Merriam, 2008). Because adults learn in multiple ways, an attempt to reduce their learning to one theory is a gross oversimplification of the process (Merriam, 2008). Therefore, I also framed my study around two other theories: self-directed learning and group learning.

Self-directed learners take on the responsibility of acquiring new knowledge and are active participants in the learning process (Steinke, 2012). Self-directed learning allows adults the autonomy and ability to control their own learning by setting goals and taking proprietorship (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

The theory of group learning also provided a framework as I attempted to explore perceptions associated with what occurred when groups of teachers collaborate. Researchers maintain that learners feel the need to belong to a community and true learning occurs when a group of learners exist and work together (Lieberman & Mace, 2009; Wenger, 1998).

**Assumptions**

Qualitative research allows the stories of other people to be told while diminishing any sense of power that a researcher might hold over a participant (Creswell, 2007). The following assumptions formed the basis for my data collection, analysis, and reporting:

1) I assumed participants would willingly participate in the study.

2) I assumed participants would honestly answer the questions.

3) I refrained from allowing my own biases and prejudices to affect the participants’ answers or to affect my interpretation of their answers.
Limitations of the Study

Limitations exist with any research study. I acknowledged the limitations of my study before I collected data as an attempt to address barriers that might be present while I conducted research. The following were limitations to my study:

1) By its nature, qualitative research is subjective and as a researcher I relied on the subjective answers of the participants (Hatch, 2002). Participants may at times respond with answers that are not accurate reflections of their thoughts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2) I conducted “backyard” research (Hatch, 2002, p. 47) and had prior experience as a district leader, high school administrator, and high school teacher in the district I studied. As the key instrument for data collection and analysis, I may have had biases that swayed the interpretation of the results.

3) Although the interview process allowed me to explore the perceptions of the participants (Patton, 1990), capturing a true reflection of the participants’ perceptions was dependent upon the questions asked during the interview.

4) Participation was by choice and those who chose to participate might represent a group different than those who chose not to participate. Therefore, the perceptions may not be a true reflection of all district employees.

5) Although the findings in my study may be found to be transferrable to similar school districts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), my study was limited to one school system in the southeastern part of the United States. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable because of the essence of qualitative research.
Significance of the Study

Multiple types of professional development activities exist for educators (Wei et al, 2009). Standards also exist for determining effective professional development. However, many activities deemed as professional development for teachers often have little impact on classroom practices (Garet et al., 2001). Current literature suggests, however, that the use of PLCs may offer a form of professional development that can increase student achievement (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). While PLCs offer a means of job-embedded professional development for teachers, it is still unclear that this model has an impact on classroom practices of high school teachers (Wells & Feun, 2007, 2008). Because there is paucity in the research that indicates whether teacher learning occurs during participation in a PLC, this study attempted to explore participants’ perspectives in an effort to help district leaders and school administrators structure PLCs so that teachers will acquire the new knowledge and develop the skills necessary to support change in their classroom practices.

Definition of Terms

Audit Trail: An audit trail is a detailed record of data that present during a study and can be used to support the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Case: For this study there were a total of four cases. District leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers comprised three of the four cases. The fourth case was a cross-case analysis of the other three cases. Stake (2006) called this the quintain.
**Case Study:** According to Creswell (2013), case study is a method of qualitative design that looks at participants bound by time or space through an in-depth collection of multiple sources.

**Member Checking:** Member checking is a method by which participants can view their interview transcripts in order to verify the accuracy of the recorded information (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Multiple-Case Study:** Multiple-case study allows a researcher to look for similarities and differences among several separate cases. The researcher repeats the same procedure for each individual case (Stake, 2006).

**Professional Development:** Professional development is an activity or experience that may lead to professional learning (Wei et al., 2009).

**Professional Learning:** Professional learning is a by-product of an activity or experience that leads to gained teacher knowledge and a change in classroom practices (Wei et al., 2009).

**Professional Learning Community (PLC):** A professional learning community is a group of educators who are dedicated to collaboratively focusing on ways to promote student growth through processes of inquiry, problem solving, and reflecting on current classroom practices (DuFour et al., 2006).

**Qualitative Research:** Qualitative research focuses on an inductive reasoning process whereby ideas emerge based on common daily occurrences in people’s lives (Yin, 2011).

**Quintain:** The quintain is the focus of a multiple-case study acting as the most important case and the concept holding the other cases together (Stake, 2006).
**Triangulation:** Triangulation conveys that the research is trustworthy as it offers a means of checking data against multiple sources. When multiple sources of data corroborate the same idea, findings from the research may be seen as more credible (Yin, 2011).

**Organization of the Study**

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 consists of statements of the research problem and defines the purpose of the study. Research questions, theoretical framework, assumptions, limitations of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, organization of the study, and a summary of the chapter are also included. A comprehensive review of the literature is found in chapter 2 and focuses on theories of adult learning, characteristics of professional development, and the implementation of the professional learning community model. Chapter 3 examines the use of qualitative research as an appropriate method for this study. Chapter 3 also examines the multiple case study design that I utilized to conduct my study as well as philosophical assumptions, philosophical framework, sampling method, and the selection and recruitment of both site and participants. In addition, chapter three reviews the use of data sources, data collection process, data analysis, establishing credibility, ethical considerations, the role of the researcher, and a summary. Chapter 4 is a detailed case description of the perceptions that district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers reported about adult learning that occurred as a result of teachers’ participation in a PLC. Chapter 4 also contains a cross-case analysis of the perceptions of district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers in order to discover similarities and differences among the
groups. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study, a summary of the research findings as they relate to the research questions, implications for current practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

**Summary**

Many forms of professional development are available for teachers and standards exist which dictate effective professional development. This chapter introduced the concepts associated with professional development, professional learning, and professional learning communities. I defined professional development as activities, professional learning as a change in professional practice, and PLCs as one method of professional development. While some experts believe that professional learning must occur in order to change practices in the classroom (Mouza 2006; Wei et al. 2009), the one method that many tout as a model for effective professional development may or may not provide professional learning for teachers. Little research exists to show the connection between authentic teacher learning and teachers participating in a PLC.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of undertaking new research studies is to contribute to a framework of information that can serve to satisfy deficiencies in the knowledge base (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Hatch (2002) ascertained that establishing “a solid grounding in the substantive and theoretical literature related to the study places it in a frame of reference for the researcher and the reader” (p. 41). An extended review of the literature was conducted using multiple databases and variations of key terms associated with adult learning, teacher professional development, teacher change, authentic learning, professional learning community, and teacher collaboration.

This literature review began with a discussion of the theoretical framework informing the study. The review then moved to research findings on professional development and a survey into what constituted effective professional development. I concluded the review with research conducted on professional learning communities and the characteristics associated with effective implementation of professional learning communities.

Theoretical Framework

According to Yin (2011), searching for meaning of real life experience through qualitative research often translates into a search for abstract ideas. The use of abstract ideas connects a theory to a research study in order to authenticate its significance. One benefit of connecting a qualitative study to a theory at the outset of the study is that it
provides a starting point for the research (Yin, 2011). Merriam (1998) affirmed that educational research frequently utilizes a theory as a beginning framework. I began my literature review with a focus of concepts surrounding adult learning and how those methods of acquiring knowledge may develop and change as learners strive to become self-directed learners and as learners collaboratively work in group situations.

**Andragogy**

While early works by Knowles centered around the idea that adults learn best in informal situations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010), he modified his views during the 1960s (Knowles et al., 2011). After spending many years studying adult learning and devising his own beliefs about adult learning, Knowles settled on the term *andragogy* in 1967 when Dusan Savicevic, a Yugoslavian educator introduced the term to him during a course on adult learning Knowles was teaching. Savicevic explained to Knowles that andragogy was a term used by European adult educators “as a parallel to pedagogy, to provide a label for the growing body of knowledge and technology in regard to adult learning” (p. 6). Knowles affirmed the term as necessary for differentiating between child learning and adult learning and began using the term in 1968 to describe his own theoretical framework.

Knowles (1970) first presented the concepts of pedagogy and andragogy as two separate models, one for children and one for adults. However, after a decade of hearing that educators at both the elementary and secondary levels were using some of the andragogical ideas in their classes, Knowles applied the concepts of both models to learning
situations (Knowles, 1990; Knowles et al., 2011). Thus, Knowles concluded that one must understand pedagogy to appreciate andragogy (Knowles et al., 2011).

Between 1960 and 1980 researchers acquired a plethora of information regarding adult learners and the processes by which they learn (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Merriam (2001b) noted that Knowles developed a program which met the needs of the adult learner and continues to be the best example of adult learning. However, Knowles himself questioned whether his ideas could be called a theory of adult learning (Knowles & Associates, 1984). He stated that he “feel[s] more comfortable thinking of it as a system of concepts that, in fact, incorporates pedagogy rather than opposing it” (p. 8). He thought of andragogy as “a system of alternative sets of assumptions” (Knowles, 1990, p. 64) which explained how andragogy correlated with the five suppositions of pedagogy he had proposed. The following five suppositions and their purposes were outlined in Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

Regarding the concept of the learner. The adult learner was viewed as a self-directed learner who desired to be seen and treated by others as proficient in accomplishing learning tasks. The adult learner finds internal turmoil with any kind of training or education that reminds them of being treated as children when the only responsibility of the learner was to adhere to the directions of the teacher (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

Regarding the role of the learner’s experience. The andragogical model developed by Knowles purported the adult learner enters any learning situation with more ex-
perience than the child learner. These experiences provide for the educational experience because the adult learners have multiple experiences from which to draw information and with which to share information with others. The activities of the adult learner should be centered around “group discussion, simulation exercises, laboratory experiences, field experiences, problem-solving projects, and the like [in order to] make use of the experiences of the learners” (Knowles & Associates, 1984, p. 10). Knowles acknowledged that because of the experiences adults bring to any learning situation, the possibility arises that the adult learners will have preconceived ideas and beliefs that might negatively impact new learning.

**Regarding readiness to learn.** Adults learn when they are ready to learn and when they see a need to learn something in order to benefit them as adults. Knowles and Associates (1984) suggested this contrasts to pedagogy and how children learn because children are told when it is time to learn something.

**Regarding orientations to learning.** Knowles and Associates (1984) explained that since adults learn when they know they will benefit from the learning experience, it is important to recognize that learning by adults is not done for the mere “sake of learning” (p. 12). Rather, learning for adults occurs when adults realize that life will be easier and better due to the learning experience. Therefore, the learning experience must be pertinent to the adult from the beginning.
Regarding motivation to learn. While students are motivated by external factors to learn, adults are motivated by intrinsic characteristics such as self-esteem, gaining self-confidence, recognition from others and self-actualization (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012).

By the fourth edition of *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Knowles, 1990), a sixth supposition was added and placed in the first position on the list. Knowles added “The need to know” and suggested that “adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it” (p. 57). He concluded that adult learners will better situate themselves to the learning process if they know upfront the reason behind the information being presented. Because Knowles’ andragogical approach is one of veneration, belief, assistance, and teamwork, andragogy has become a prominent adult learning theory (Henschke, 2011; Maehl, 2000).

New perspectives about andragogy have continued to develop from both research and theory (Knowles et al., 2011). The main principle surrounding andragogy, the idea that learners “need to know” (Knowles, 1990, p.10), has been united with the idea that adult learners should be involved in a “collaborative planning process for their learning” (Knowles et al., p. 181). The basic premise behind andragogy asserted that “adults need information and involvement before learning: The how, the what, and the why of learning” (p. 183).

Self-Directed Learning

Once the how, the what, and the why have been established, self-directed learning becomes an area of focus as part of the adult learning theory proposed by Knowles (Amstutz, 1999; Knowles et al., 2011). Steinke (2012) suggested that Knowles’ adult
learning theory and his focus on the traits of the adult learner led to a definition of a self-directed learner. Becoming a self-directed learner allows adults to have input into not only information ascertained, but also the time at which the information was acquired (Merriam, 2008). Knowles et al. (2011) suggested that autonomy of the learning situation is the most important aspect of self-directed learning. Steinke advocated that autonomy can provide learners with opportunities to become problem solvers, thus separating them from those who are not self-directed learners. Self-directed learning can grant learners the chance to experience learning rather than a perfunctory completion of a workshop or seminar (Weiss, 2000).

Kasl and Yorks (2010) developed the Personal Responsibility Orientation Model to further explain self-directed learning. Their model argued that self-directed learning in conjunction with learner self-direction solidified the essence of a self-directed learner. Kasl and Yorks emphasized the teaching and learning process as they focused on the traits that make learners accept responsibility for their own learning. However, Merriam and Brockett (2007) argued that if the individual completely assumed responsibility, self-directed learning may neglect social context, which can be an important factor in the learning process. For the purposes of my study, social context was of extreme importance as PLCs are group situations requiring teachers to work together; therefore, I also explored an additional framework, that of group learning.

**Group Learning**

Group learning for adults was another area of focus relevant to my study. Adult education fosters group learning because adults tend to think this is a positive model
(Imel & Tisdell, 1996). However, most of the literature that exists about how learning occurs in groups focuses on group dynamics, not the actual learning that transpires (Dechant, Marsick, & Kasl, 1993; Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1992). Kasl et al. (1992) proposed an idea about adult learning that occurs in the group format. According to these authors, four phases of group learning exist: (a) contained learning, (b) collected learning, (c) constructed learning, and (d) continuous learning. Imel and Tisdell (1996) described these phases as a process of moving from “individual learning to cooperative learning to collaborative learning” (para. 3).

Collaborative learning engages adults in a quest for knowledge as they become a part of a learning group that searches for methods to acquire new knowledge and to enhance current knowledge (Kasl & Yorks, 2010). Adults working together in small groups with a single focus of inquiry facilitate adult learning (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). Three structures of group learning exist: informal learning groups, formal learning groups, and teams. Researchers agree that these group learning structures tend to result in a greater gain in knowledge (Cockrell, Hughes-Caplow, & Donaldson, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). However, Hassanien (2007) noted that learning at a university setting does not automatically occur because adults are placed in groups. Hassanien’s study concluded that while learning can occur in a group, it only occurs if all members of the group are taking responsibility for learning and engaging in the process of collaboration.

Professional Development

The idea of the life-long learner has become a common theme of discussion among those in the field of education (Webster-Wright, 2009). While teachers are re-
quired to participate in multiple hours of professional development in order to maintain certification, the conventional methods of professional development are often heralded as ineffectual and seldom result in meaningful and lasting teacher learning (Mouza, 2006). The term professional development applies to formal experiences that occur in coursework and structured workshop formats; informal learning may occur in a teacher’s daily interactions with others, both inside and outside of the school setting (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Desimone, 2009). The idea of professional development is an accumulation of knowledge and information deemed important to success in the workplace (Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Hoffman, 1992; Sternberg & Ben-Zeev, 2001). Professional learning occurs when teachers gain knowledge that changes their classroom practices, thereby increasing student achievement (Lieberman & Wood, 2002; Wei et al., 2009). Borko (2004) suggested that the activities in which teachers can participate for professional development are numerous and varied and success of the activities depends on the teachers as individuals and the learning context in which the professional development occurs.

While educators and researchers agree on the measures of quality professional development (Garet et al., 2001), there is little evidence that such conditions are met in most professional development activities and contexts (Gabriel, 2011). The practice of professional development to improve educators’ skills and knowledge requires time, money, and resources (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Frequently, however, resources are spent on isolated training experiences and workshops that provide little enhancement of teacher learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Chaudary & Shahida, 2012; Eros, 2011; Varela, 2012). Further, the variety of professional development activities available does not necessarily
equate to teacher learning (Desimone, 2009). Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, and Birman (2002) agreed that a review of the activity itself was not sufficient to determine effectiveness. The characteristics associated with the activity need to be evaluated (Garet et al., 2001) to determine if the activity provides meaningful teacher learning.

**Characteristics of effective professional development.** Researchers over the last two decades have explored the kinds of professional development activities offered, what teachers learn, and what changes take place in their classroom as a result of this learning (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001). Educational experts also have documented how professional development should be structured in order to be valuable (Carey & Frechtling, 1997; Cohen & Hill, 2001). Desimone et al. (2002) found that when professional development aligns with specific practices, teachers transfer those practices into the classroom. The general consensus among experts is that effective professional development focuses on content and how students learn that content (Carey & Frechtling, 1997; Wei et al., 2009). Professional development opportunities that concentrate on curriculum content and how students acquire that content has an impact on student achievement (Banilower, Heck, & Weiss, 2007; Smith et al., 2007).

Another characteristic of effective professional development is that it must be intense and sustained over a period of time (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007; Shields, Marsh, & Adelman, 1998; Supovitz, Mayer, & Kable, 2000; Weiss, Montgomery, Ridgway, & Bond, 1998). While researchers have not agreed upon a specific number of hours needed for professional development to be effective,
Desimone (2009) established that 20 hr has an impact on whether change occurs in the classroom.

Two other characteristics of effective professional development include the ability to align professional development opportunities with school improvement plans and to help shape strong connections among teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Marrongelle, Sztajn, & Smith, 2013; Penuel et al., 2007). The strong connections among teachers allow for potential dialogue and discourse, thus providing the opportunity for teacher growth (Borko, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles 1998).

In reviewing the findings from 10 case studies, Birman, Desimone, Porter, and Garet (2000) categorized effective professional development into the following three features based on structure of the activity: form, duration and participation. Birman et al. also recognized three essential areas that deal with professional development practices: the focus on content, active learning, and coherence. When a focus is placed on aligning these six areas, teachers learn and classroom practices change (Birman et al., 2000).

**Framework for professional development.** Although characteristics of effective professional development have been identified, those characteristics do not indicate the method by which professional development can most effectively be offered (Marrongelle et al., 2013). Historically, teachers have been taught to use a model of professional development that emphasizes a memorization of facts as opposed to conceptual learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Porter & Brophy, 1988). One way this model occurs is through isolated workshop trainings. While the isolated workshops and confer-
ences comprise many hours of professional development that teachers receive, the work-
shop formats are typically ineffective (Knapp, 2003; Loucks-Horsley et al., 1998). Ball
and Cohen (1999) noted that most professional development offered is insignificant and
shallow because the sessions are often detached from authentic curriculum and
knowledge acquisition. Ball and Cohen proposed a practice-based professional develop-
ment framework for teachers that includes a learning-while-doing approach. According
to the researchers, other formats for professional development “would be like expecting
someone to learn to swim on a sidewalk” (p. 12). To align with this practiced-based ap-
proach, professional development for educators must follow three basic conditions: (1)
Teachers acknowledge what good classroom practice is and understand where they fall
on the continuum of good practice. (2) Teachers understand what skills and knowledge
are needed. (3) Professional development providers must know how to teach teachers
(Ball & Cohen).

According to Garet et al. (2001), effective professional development models focus
on four areas: (a) content knowledge, (b) teaching practices, (c) teaching content in a spe-
cific way, and (d) curriculum materials that can be used to enhance student performance.
Study groups, mentoring, and coaching are models that incorporate all four areas (Garet
et al.). These models offer collective participation and are designed to let teachers have
the time to work together, discussing different elements of professional development such
as skills, concepts, and problem solving (Garet et al.).

Another model for professional development that engages teachers in active learn-
ing in group settings (Barth, 1991; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Knapp,
2003). According to several key researchers, active learning occurs when teachers have
the opportunity to observe other colleagues and to receive feedback from observations of others (Carey & Frechtling, 1997; Cohen & Hill, 2001; Garet et al., 2001; Penuel et al., 2007). Professional development experienced in a group setting offers teachers the chance to attempt new instructional strategies more confidently because teachers find reassurance from what their colleagues share with them (Barth, 1991; Meister, 2010; Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005).

Yet another model, school-based coaching is a method of professional development that combines customary professional development with the desire to learn about practices that will be beneficial in the classroom (Wei et al., 2009). Guskey (2000) suggested that coaching provides the kind of professional development that will bring new knowledge and skills into the classroom and allow knowledge and skills to become grounded and more permanent.

**Professional Learning Communities**

A preponderance of evidence supports the use of PLCs in schools to improve student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker et al., 2002; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). PLCs function based on the idea that job-embedded professional development for teachers will improve student achievement (Loertscher, 2005). The job-embedded learning centers around a group of teachers sharing their practices in a collaborative setting in order to critically examine and reflect upon those practices in an effort to improve their teaching (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006). Schools across the country stress the importance of this kind of teacher collabora-
tion (DuFour et al., 2005). According to DuFour et al. (2005), the quality of teaching improves when teachers continually collaborate in a structured format. When members of a PLC work together to achieve desired goals and outcomes, the results can be positive (Hashmi, 2011). A collective case study conducted by Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) indicated the importance of teachers working together and developing a sense of camaraderie. Linder et al. found that teachers became energized as they met in their PLCs to discuss common interests. However, this may not always be true of all PLCs. The findings of Maloney and Konza (2011) suggest that the success of PLCs relies on teachers actually desiring to communicate with other colleagues in a group setting. According to Maloney and Konza, some teachers find the group collaboration an intrusion into their valuable and limited time and do not perceive the process to be worthwhile to their personal learning. Since PLCs tend to be structured from a top down approach, the teachers have little say in what becomes a top priority of discussion and focus (Lee & Shaari, 2012). Therefore, it becomes extremely important for school leaders to ensure that teachers participating in PLCs have a strong foundation in what PLCs are and what they mean (Eaker et al., 2002).

**Characteristics of professional learning communities.** Professional Learning Communities must adhere to six characteristics in order to be considered effective professional development and to ensure change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2004; Eaker et al., 2002). PLCs must share the same mission, vision, and values to the extent that everyone in the school is able to communicate and defend these concepts because they truly believe them. The PLC must also share a commitment to collective inquiry for
pursuing new knowledge and better methods of teaching. The third characteristic is one of collaborative teams. This is not an individual learning process; it is people who learn from one another.

The fourth characteristic of a PLC is professional collaboration. For members of PLCs, however, collaborative learning is not enough. PLCs require action orientation and experimentation. Goals are turned into action and inaction is never an option. PLCs are willing to experiment and develop new ideas.

The continuous desire to take action and to experiment leads to the fifth characteristic of continuous improvement. PLCs never settle for status quo. They always strive to improve. The last characteristic that distinguishes a PLC is a results orientation. A PLC must assess what is occurring in classrooms, determine effectiveness, and be willing to make changes as needed. Fully implementing these six characteristics takes time, patience, and determination (DuFour et al., 2008).

**Implementation of professional learning communities.** Establishing true change based on the six characteristics of a PLC is challenging because it calls for a cultural change at the school level (Fullan, 2001). A 3 year study by Wells and Feunn (2008) shows little change in 24 high schools that utilized the PLC process. Only five of the high schools showed that the PLCs had advanced past the meeting stage. Another study of six high schools, conducted by Wells and Feun (2007) indicated that teachers enjoy collaborating about resources and chosen curriculum, but they do not necessarily focus on changing practices to impact student learning. A study of secondary schools in Malta shows that while teachers do attempt collaboration, it is often difficult because they do
not believe that sharing information will actually impact teaching practices and student learning (Bezzina, 2006). Bezzina concluded that PLC development is difficult for all parties involved but it is necessary that the leaders of the schools offer support and time for teachers to work through the characteristics of effective PLCs.

Wood (2007b) stated that unless PLCs are structured to allow teachers more control over what occurs in the PLC, teachers will not benefit from the process. In a multiple case study conducted by King (2011), the researcher sought to look at the collaborative process among teachers and concluded that when teachers willingly collaborate with other educators, school improvement occurs.

Summary

The literature review began with a look at adult learning theories. I examined three theories: andragogy, self-directed learning, and group learning. I discussed the six suppositions of andragogy and looked at how self-directed learning functions as an extension of andragogy. Because of the focus of my study on the PLCs, I also looked at the idea behind group learning and how group learning can support adult learning.

The literature review continued with an exploration of effective professional development for teachers. Based on current research, I provided an explanation of what standards constitute effective professional development. While there is little argument that teachers need professional development for continued growth, (Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Hoffman, 1992; Sternberg & Ben-Zeev, 2001), the direction a teacher needs to take for professional development remains nebulous. Another area of focus for my literature review was to look at what the literatures says about PLCs. I reviewed the findings on
what defines a PLC. I also reviewed the characteristics of PLCs as well as some of the more recent research findings regarding the implementation of PLCs.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative researchers search for understanding from people who experience life as it occurs (Hatch, 2002). Merriam (1998) contended that qualitative research attempts to explain experiences, systems, or viewpoints of people involved in the experiences and systems. Additionally, Creswell (2009) conveyed that qualitative research “is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). The characteristic of qualitative research made this method of inquiry appropriate for this current study as I attempted to explore how educators at three different levels within one school district perceived the PLC experience as a means of professional learning. The design of PLCs requires social interactions among their members. According to Hatch (2002), it is through qualitative research, that the social actions can be observed and perspectives can be gathered. The emergent design of qualitative research allowed me to gather information about the thought processes of study participants as they described the PLC process. My research design aligned with the assertion by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that phenomenon are best understood in their naturalistic settings where the phenomenon is “spawned, harbored, and supported” (p. 189). Based on data collection, I made interpretations based on the points of view of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Utilizing this qualitative research design, I acted as a key instrument in collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data. This design reinforces the role of the researcher.
True meaning comes from the participants’ perceptions and not from the perceptions of the researcher (Creswell, 2009). According to Erickson (1986), a qualitative research design offers a discovery of exactly what happens and what it means to those participants.

**Multiple Case Study Design**

According to Creswell (2009), research design “involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods” (p. 5). One tradition of qualitative research is a case study design. Despite equivocal descriptions of a case study (Edmunds, 1999; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), Creswell (2013) described a case study as one design of qualitative research “that may be an object of study as well as a product of the inquiry” (p. 97). As such, case studies provide researchers the opportunity to study a real life situation that is bounded by time or space through an in-depth collection of data using multiple sources. Based on identified themes that emerge, information is reported as a case description (Creswell 2013). Using this design, I investigated three groups of educators who were all bound by the same system. As stated by Creswell (2013), when multiple sites are studied, a multiple case approach is used. Stake (2006) asserted that the multiple case approach requires the use of a “quintain” which calls for the cases to all fall under one general term (p. 6). This general concept creates the needed relationship among the cases, but it also gives one case more significance than the other cases. The more significant case develops from the cross-case procedure and becomes the case that answers the central research question (Stake, 2006).
While Stake (2006) identified three cross-case procedure options, I utilized Track 1. With this option, individual cases received significant attention as separate entities. Reviewing the findings of individual cases reduced the possibility that the cases merged too quickly. Stake asserted that by following this track, the findings of the individual cases would lead to the anticipated quintain.

This multiple case analysis was delimited to the study of the mandatory implementation of PLCs in one school district. Using a qualitative design with a multiple case approach allowed me to tell the story of how three different groups of respondents perceived professional learning as a result of PLC participation. The design allowed me to explore the information drawn from these three cases and combine that exploration of information into the quintain, or collective case study, to form a more holistic understanding of the phenomena.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

Defining philosophical assumptions from the beginning of the research process helps to establish the appropriate research design (Creswell, 2009). Creswell and Slife and Williams (1995) noted that philosophical assumptions tend to be hidden in research; therefore, researchers should acknowledge and disclose their embraced beliefs. Although it was my desire to capture the thoughts and perceptions of those participating in my study, I had to acknowledge that as a researcher, I assigned my own meanings and ideas to the event that I studied (Yin, 2011). I had previously participated in PLCs as an educator at different levels within a system and therefore had preconceived ideas. In essence, I demonstrated the emic and etic perceptions of adult learning in a PLC. The emic percep-
tion captured the view of the participants regarding a particular happening while the etic view captured my perceptions as the researcher (Yin, 2011). To address my role of values while conducting research, I aligned my beliefs with those of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Hatch (2002). I chose the following five assumptions to guide this qualitative research study: (a) ontology, (b) epistemology, (c) axiology, (d) rhetorical, and (e) methodology.

**Ontology**

Participants make their own reality based on the experiences in which they are involved (Hatch, 2002). Ontology guided the premise of my research because as a researcher I believe in multiple constructed realities. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that constructed reality means there are an infinite number of realities and they are all based on the experiences of those involved. I believe that all of the educators in this study, regardless of their positions within the school district, constructed their own realities based on what they had experienced at an individual level. Teachers had different experiences than school administrators and school administrators’ experiences differed from those of district leaders. Even within the same group of educators, varying realities existed based on every day human experience. Those experiences helped to create what they perceived to be reality.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology looks at what knowledge is and how it is gained (Goldman, 1986). I ascribed to this philosophical assumption because a true understanding of the partici-
pants’ perceptions were derived from making connections with them. In qualitative research, eliminating the relationship between a researcher and respondents is impossible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Epistemology allowed me to construct knowledge as I gathered information from the participants based on our interactions. Essentially, I became a part of the learning process as I explored the perceptions of the participants. The essence of an emergent design requires the researcher to learn from those who are already in the know. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described this as “a continuously interacting and interpreting investigator [because] methodological steps are based upon the results of steps already taken” (p. 102).

**Axiology**

Because multiple realities exist and the relationship of the knower to the known is inseparable, objectivity is not the goal of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a researcher conducting “backyard” research (Hatch, 2002, p. 47), it was important for me to ascribe to the axiological assumption that biases and prejudices may exist. Axiology provided a way to report these biases as the data were gathered. Bracketing my own personal experiences was an important step to ensure that my beliefs did not influence the data gathered from participants (Hatch, 2002). Member checking, triangulation, reflective journaling, and conducting an audit trail helped me monitor and record my biases.

**Rhetorical**

The rhetorical assumption was an important part of my study because the participants own words revealed a story. Hearing the voices of the participants and using direct
quotations to capture their voices allowed me to portray their true perceptions. Creswell (2013) contended that a strong relationship exists between how a study is written and how the data are analyzed. I believe that analyzing the data was paramount to the actual words of the participants. If textual data are not recorded in detail then analysis is also limited. Merriam (1988) ascribed to the idea that inclusion of description outweighs analysis. The author recommended ratio of 60% participants’ words and 40% analysis of those words.

**Methodology**

Methodology was also utilized because I believe that ideas emerge from an inductive reasoning process as the data were collected and analyzed. As a researcher, it was impossible to predict the perceptions that the participants might have. All of the perceptions held by participants had an impact on the study and those perceptions could not be situated at the beginning of the study. In describing the nature of an emergent design, Creswell (2013) stated:

The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data, the questions may change, the forms of data collection may be altered, and the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified during the process of conducting the study. The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from the participants and engage in best practices to obtain the information. (p. 47)

**Philosophical Framework**

Social constructivism provided the philosophical framework for this study. Creswell (2007) defined social constructivism as a worldview in which individuals con-
struct an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Within social construc-
tivism the viewpoints of participants are emphasized (Creswell, 2009). According to Cre-
swell (2009), researchers who choose this framework should observe how participants in-
teract with one another, the specific place the interaction occurs, and how the participants
develop meaning associated with the interactions in the natural setting (Creswell, 2009).
Hatch (2002) stated that “constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are
inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world
from their own vantage points” (p. 15). Hatch further stated that these multiple realities
are “often shared across social groups” (p. 15). By utilizing the social constructivist par-
adigm, I was able to concentrate on the views and perspectives of the educators at three
levels within one school district.

**Sampling Method**

I utilized purposeful sampling for this study, which allowed me to select sites and
participants purposefully reflecting the research problem (Creswell, 2007). Patton (1990)
stated, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich
cases…from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the
purpose of the research” (p. 169). I also employed a criterion sampling strategy which
afforded me the chance to choose participants who fit the predetermined criteria of being
a participant of the PLC process in the selected district (Patton).
Site Selection

This study was conducted within one school district in the southeastern part of the United States. At the time of the study, the school district was the fourth largest and the fastest growing system in the state. The system consisted of 36 suburban and rural schools with 28,432 students. A diverse socioeconomic population existed among the different schools in the system. Thirty-four percent of students in the system received free or reduced lunch. Two schools in the system had a 70% free and reduced lunch status and a total of 19 schools had a 40% free and reduced lunch population. The district educated the largest ELL population in its state, with 5.7% of its population receiving services. The system employed a staff of 3,533 certified and noncertified personnel.

The system is known for its award winning educational programs and its continued focus on student achievement and teacher improvement. In 2007, the system implemented a long term strategic plan that emphasized continuous improvement for all schools. Part of the instructional model in the district called for mandatory teacher collaboration in PLCs at the local school level. The district had allocated monies for the training and implementation of PLCs within its system. The PLC process was monitored at the district level by monthly walk-throughs and continuous dialogue among school administrators and district leaders. This had been an ongoing practice since 2007. School culture surveys were administered annually to help assess each school’s Continuous Improvement Plan.

For this study, interviews with district leaders occurred at the central office and the system’s satellite office. Interviews with school administrators occurred at the local
schools. Focus group interviews occurred at the system’s instructional service center where teachers regularly participated in professional development activities.

**Sample Selection**

Patton (1990) suggested specifying a minimum number of participants for a sample based on “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given and the purpose of the study and stakeholder interests” (p. 186). The study consisted of four district leaders who had been a part of the district since at least 2007. Five high school administrators were included as a part of the sample. While the preferred criterion of high school administrators would have been employment within the system since 2007, it was necessary to broaden the date to 2009 in order to identify five high school administrators. The emergent design of qualitative research allowed for this change to occur. High school teachers who had been employed by the district since 2007 were also a part of a sample group. A total of 25 high school teachers participated in three focus groups. Two focus groups had eight participating teachers. One focus group had nine participating teachers.

**Recruitment**

The superintendent for the district acted as the gatekeeper. As noted by Hatch (2002), the role of a gatekeeper is to help gain entrance at a site and to help identify possible participants. I sent a consent letter via email to the superintendent asking for permission to conduct my study within the district (see Appendix A). The superintendent in turn sent the request to the assistant superintendent of instruction. The assistant superintendent provided permission to conduct the study. There was no need to utilize the gate-
keeper to identify participants because this information was listed on the school system’s website and housed in a state database accessible by school employees. Using the website, I identified all district leaders and then verified that district leaders had been employees of the system since 2007 through the state database. I sent a recruitment email to all identified district leaders and asked them to participate in this study (see Appendix B). I received four email responses accepting my request to participate.

I followed the same process to identify high school administrators. Once identified as an administrator, I verified that they had been employed as an administrator within the system since at least the year 2009. I grouped the administrators according to the number of years employed as an administrator by the system in an attempt to procure the minimum sample size of five high school administrators. I first asked administrators who had been employed in the system as an administrator since 2007 to participate in my study via a recruitment email (see Appendix C). I received email responses from four administrators willing to participate. I then sent the same recruitment email to administrators who had been employed in the system since 2008 and received no willing responses. I sent a recruitment email to administrators who had been employed in the system since 2009 as an administrator and received a response from one administrator who was willing to participate. With my minimum sample size met, I sent no further recruitment emails to administrators.

All high school teachers listed on the system’s website were vetted through the state database to determine years of employment within the system. I sent a recruitment email (see Appendix D) to those teachers meeting the 2007 criteria and asked them to participate in the study. From my email recruitment letter, I received 25 responses from
teachers who agreed to participate. Via email correspondence, I then sent three dates to those 25 teachers and asked them to choose a date to participate. I scheduled two focus groups of eight teachers and one focus group of nine teachers.

Data Collection

Yin (2009) asserted that while case studies strive to collect as many sources as possible, no one source proves superior to another source. In fact, Yin conveyed that as long as a researcher follows three principles of data collection, a single data source may even be used. The first principle of data collection focuses on triangulation of the data. The second principle addresses the creation of a data base and the third principle calls for a maintaining a chain of evidence. Creswell (2007) suggested that data collection is a circular process of “interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 118).

Data Sources

For multiple case studies one of the most common sources for data collection involves conducting interviews (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009, 2011). I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews of district leaders and high school administrators. Utilizing interviews as a main data source afforded me an opportunity to view pertinent understandings of the participants and how those participants constructed meaning within their own natural setting (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2009). I held focus groups that served as another data source and yielded valuable information germane to the study (Edmunds, 1999). The focus groups also offered exploration into the perceived realities of their participants.
(Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Keeping a reflective journal throughout the process provided yet another data source for the investigation (Creswell, 2007). Triangulating one data source against another became crucial to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2006). I triangulated data within and across cases.

**Data Collection Process**

Before collecting interview data, I created an interview protocol consisting of in-depth, semi-structured questions. Questions were developed for the purpose of addressing the central research question (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2009, 2011). The semi-structured interview questions also allowed for further probing questions during the interview process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). I arranged each individual interview at the time requested by the participant. I suggested that interviews take place at the participant’s office. Three district level participants requested that I come to their office, and one district level participant wanted to meet me at my office. All of the high school administrator participants wanted me to meet them at their schools. Individual interviews lasted approximately 50 min in length and were audio-recorded. I transcribed each interview verbatim within 48 hr of each interview. After the transcriptions were completed, I sent a copy of the transcription via email to the participants in order for them to have a chance to verify that I had accurately captured their words and ideas. Three of the four district level participants replied and approved their transcripts. No response was received from the fourth district level participant. One high school administrator responded via email that she thought the transcript was accurate. I deleted the audio-recordings in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.
I moderated three focus group interviews scheduled on three different dates. Focus groups lasted approximately 60 min in length and were held at the district’s instructional service center, a common location for teacher meetings. Using guided questions for the focus group process, I served as the moderator in order to elicit the clear perceptions from participants. The guided questions provided a framework so that the participants had the flexibility to offer information while staying on the topic of discussion (Edmunds, 1999). Focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim within a 48 hour period of time. I emailed a copy of the focus group transcript to the participants of that focus group in order to verify the group’s conversation. I received responses from a total of three participants. Two participants from focus group one indicated the transcripts were correct. One participant from focus group two indicated the transcript was correct and no responses from the third focus group were received.

Measures were taken to protect data after it was collected. All audio-recordings were erased after they were transcribed. All transcriptions were stored on my personal computer which was password protected. Research journal notes were stored in a locked file cabinet. No one else had access to either the computer or the file cabinet.

I kept a personal research journal in which I recorded emerging themes, ideas, and reflections. I also recorded my notes in this journal during interviews and focus group sessions. Finally, I employed the use of an audit trail as I documented each step of the research process.
Data Analysis

I used Creswell’s (2007) data analysis spiral image to represent the collection and analysis of data throughout the study. This strategy allowed me to draw meaning from what the participants said. I recorded my thoughts of the interviews through written notes in the margins of my interview protocol. Written notes in the margins reflected any thoughts that I had as I conducted the interviews. Creswell’s (2007) idea of “memoing” allowed me to create short phrases and titles that I later categorized into themes (p. 67). I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software program, to organize data and to develop deep levels of analysis as themes emerged from the data. After I analyzed the data as individual cases, I employed Yin’s (2009) cross-case analysis method to search for central themes that were bound by the context of a PLC.

Establishing Credibility

Different perspectives about data credibility exist within the realm of qualitative research. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) synthesized these perspectives into four categories: (a) credibility, (b) authenticity, (c) criticality, and (d) integrity. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) advanced the concept of establishing credibility by reconciling the perspectives of various stakeholders. I used five strategies to ensure credibility in the current study. First, I clarified any potential bias that I had by acknowledging that I came to the study with preconceived ideas about the PLC process. Second, I triangulated the data to ensure the same themes existed or appeared in multiple sources of data collection. Third, I used thick, rich descriptions to describe the perceptions of the participants. I also utilized member checking to validate that the participants were heard correctly. A fifth
validation technique was the use of an audit trail where I kept a record of the steps in the research process.

Creswell and Miller (2000) asserted that it is important for researchers to acknowledge and describe their entering beliefs and biases early in the process. In a synthesis of the research, Hatch (2002) stated

The capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one’s influence on a setting, to bracket one’s biases and to monitor one’s emotional response are the same capacity that allow researchers to get close enough to understand what is going on. (p. 10)

In an effort to be “reflexive” (Hatch, 2002, p. 10), I examined my personal biases about the PLC process before, during, and after the interviews. I wrote reflective notes during and after each of the interviews to record my thoughts and observations.

I triangulated the data among the different sources in order to add a measure of “confidence in [my] findings” (Hatch, 2002, p. 121). This was done for each individual case and for the cross-case analysis.

I utilized member checking as a strategy by sending the interview transcripts to each participant. Each participant had an opportunity to review and question the transcripts. No participant indicated a change needed to be made to the transcripts.

The use of rich description provided a more comprehensive picture of the data. By including direct quotes from interview transcripts, the themes were more credible because they reflected the words of the participants.

I made every attempt to provide trustworthiness to my study keeping an audit trail. The audit trail was a detailed record of my research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical research requires that the investigator protect all participants’ rights, needs, and values (Creswell, 2009). I began the research process by completing an initial Institutional Review Board (IRB) training sponsored by the university in which I am enrolled as a doctoral candidate. I then followed procedures to obtain IRB approval to conduct the current research study (see Appendix I). I asked the superintendent of the district to provide consent to conduct the study through a letter via email containing information about the study, about the participants who would be involved in the study, and about the benefits of conducting the study. Based on information included in a recruitment letter sent to the targeted population, participants became aware of the purpose of this study and they were informed that their participation would be voluntary. Additionally, participants were notified that they could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without penalty. Finally, the recruitment letter indicated that their participation in the study would in no way reflect their job performance. In order to accommodate those agreeing to participate in the study, the interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants. The school district, the high schools, and participants were not identified by their real names in reporting of the data. Pseudonyms were assigned to all respondents, schools, and the selected district. Each participant received a $10 gift card to a local department store at the completion of the interview.

Role of the Researcher

Since I served as the key instrument for collecting data, it was necessary to situate myself within the research process and to remain aware of my biases and prejudices (Yin,
Because of the nature of qualitative research, I had a relationship with the participants as I collected data. Therefore, it was important for me to recognize my “biases, values, and personal background… that may shape [my] interpretations” (Creswell, 2009, p. 177).

I have been an educator for 25 years, having spent 20 of those years as a secondary English teacher in both urban and suburban settings. I am a National Board Certified Teacher and I have presented at the local and state levels. I have been a part of PLCs that have functioned successfully as a learning community and I have been a part of PLCs that have not. I have my own views about the learning that might occur during a PLC; however, I made every effort to “bracket” (Hatch, 2002, p.10) my ideas so that they did not influence the participants or my interpretation of the data.

I conducted “backyard” research (Hatch, 2002, p. 47) as my study focused on the district in which I am currently employed. As a part of this system, I have worked as a teacher, a high school administrator, and as a district level administrator. Part of my job description entails working with other district leaders and administrators to promote professional development for all of our teachers. I frequently meet with district leaders and school administrators to review school data and current best practices in order to improve instruction in the classroom.

While I did not directly supervise any of the participants in the study, the prospect of a central office staff member gathering information about schools and teachers can be intimidating. I was open and honest with the participants throughout the study about my role as the researcher and introduced measures to help ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collected. Additionally, I took steps to ensure that participants un-
derstood that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary and that their work performance was in no way connected to the data gathered for the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented how I used a qualitative research approach to conduct this study. I identified my philosophical assumptions and established a rationale for my choice of design and methods. I also addressed how participants were selected for the study and discussed the protocol used for interviewing participants. I discussed the methods for storing, coding, and analyzing data. Additionally, I discussed methods for establishing credibility for this study from idea conception to completion. I concluded the chapter by identifying my role as the researcher and the importance of acknowledging my biases throughout the research process.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Although qualitative research has been criticized for its overuse of interviews and focus groups, the information that can be gathered from a qualitative study can provide an in-depth look at the perceptions and beliefs of others (Anderson, 2010). Through my conversations with district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers, I was able to explore issues and discover information that might not have been found through a quantitative study.

Case Study One: District Level Leaders

Sunshine School District saw changes in its instructional design in 2007 as they began to implement a professional development model of instruction that supported PLCs in all of its schools. A continuous improvement plan was created that involved training district leaders, administrators, and teachers about the PLC process. A district level committee was created to define what PLCs in Sunshine schools would look like.

Criteria for PLC District Implementation

District criteria included the following six ideas based on criteria described in Learning by Doing (DuFour et al., 2006).

1) Creating a shared vision, mission, and values for the district with timelines for implementation.
2) Promoting a district-wide collaborative culture with a shift from teaching to learning.

3) Looking at where the district was and moving towards a best practice approach with an emphasis on research based strategies.

4) Taking action

5) Being committed to a continuous improvement plan

In order to meet the prescribed criteria of a PLC, part of the district’s restructuring included organizing collaborative groups at the central office level into strategic areas.

**Participating Strategic Areas**

Sunshine School District’s strategic long-range plan divided district leaders into collaborative teams representing 12 areas. Teams met bi-annually to establish system goals and communicated throughout the school year to monitor implementation of the district goals. District leaders from four strategic areas participated in the study.

**Curriculum, instruction, and assessment.** This particular area represented the largest strategic team at the central office level. They worked with all departments and local schools to ensure academic programs and instructional strategies met student needs.

**School improvement.** The goal of this area was to assist the local schools in developing a yearly plan and detailed guide to concentrate on measured progress throughout the year. Local schools were assigned partners from the central office to act as liaisons between the school and the district.
Professional learning. This area of focus provided professional growth opportunities for all employees in the district as determined by identifying student needs based on student achievement data and an assessment of teachers’ needs.

At-risk. This area of focus provided a continued emphasis on comprehensive transitioning for all students and on analyzing data for English Language Learners as well as other at-risk subgroups within the district.

Participating District Leaders

Individual district leaders who participated in the study chose pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. As an additional protection of anonymity, leaders were not identified according to strategic area of focus.

- Mrs. Faye had been in education for 15 years and had been with Sunshine School District since 2002. Before moving to the district level leadership position in 2004, she was a secondary foreign language teacher.
- Ms. Lola had been in education for 22 years. Her entire career had been with Sunshine Schools. She began as an elementary teacher, moved to assistant principal and then principal of an elementary school. She had been at the district level as a leader for 8 years.
- Ms. Cones had been in education for 21 years. She had been with the district for 20 years and held positions of elementary teacher, elementary assistant principal, and elementary principal. She had been a district leader for 7 years.
Mr. Scotch had been in education 11 years. He had been at the central office level for those 11 years. Before becoming a central office leader, he was in the private sector.

Themes

Each district leader presented his or her perspective about how PLCs support high school teachers’ professional learning. Based on data collected from the district leaders, five themes emerged: district responsibility, administrator responsibility, attitude, collaboration, and authentic learning. Subthemes emerged for four of the indicated themes (See Table 1).

**District responsibility.** One theme that emerged from the data was the role the district leaders played in supporting professional development at the school level. All four district leaders believed the central office played a vital role in this area. Two subthemes emerged: providing a focus for professional development and providing resources for learning to occur.

**Providing a focus.**

Providing a focus for professional development was a responsibility that district leaders viewed as an important part of their role at the district level. By providing focused professional learning opportunities for teachers, the district leaders perceived learning would occur. Mrs. Faye commented that when districts provided a clear direction and focus, it was “powerful for all involved.” Like other participants in the study, Mrs. Faye
supported her thoughts with a personal example. She shared her experience of working as a novice teacher in a district that had provided a focused topic. Because of the experience, she felt connected to other teachers and to her district. According to Mrs. Faye, when a district has vision that is shared by all departments and all schools, then there is a central focus for that district which in turn “builds relationships among teachers, administrators, and central office. It helps to keep anyone from feeling like they are out there on an island all alone.”

Other district leaders agreed the district had a responsibility to provide a focus and a vision for learning and professional development. Supporting the theme of district responsibility and the subtheme of providing a focus for learning, Mr. Scotch stated the responsibility begins with the highest district level leader. According to him, the superintendent “sets the goal…vision…the course.”

District leaders indicated that without the direction from the district level, individual schools “would be at a loss.” The leaders perceived the district to be responsible for creating a clear focus for professional development so that all schools would be moving in the same direction. According to comments made by the administrators, if the district did not provide a focus for professional development activities, then the activities would be too numerous and widespread. It would be impossible to provide “quality opportunities” because schools would be moving in “too many different directions.”

It was clear based on the conversations with the district leaders that they believed in what they were offering at the district level. Each district leader referenced the strategic plan implemented by the system and the impact they perceived the plan had on helping teachers in the classroom. The district leaders intimated that without the central office
providing a focus and offering direction through their strategic plan, professional learning opportunities at the school level would offer little depth.

**Providing resources.**

The district leaders also intimated that it was insufficient to only provide a focus. Another district responsibility was to be a provider of resources. According to all participants, the district had a responsibility to provide the needed resources for professional learning to occur. However, the definition of resources varied among district leaders. Ms. Lola defined those resources as “quality opportunities” that “train teachers and give them more content area knowledge.” She added that providing these opportunities was essential and she did not believe teachers would improve if the district did not provide the resources for them. The district leaders’ comments all centered on what the district leaders were responsible for as leaders.

Time was viewed as another resource for which district leaders were responsible. Ms. Cone indicated that she realized the schools needed more time for PLCs to meet and this had been an area on which the district had continued to work. She explained a late start for high schools would be implemented with the new school year to help provide that needed resource of time. Mrs. Faye also saw time as a needed resource. She explained she had noticed the frustration on building administrators’ faces when they discussed PLCs in their building. According to her, “They all looked frustrated and needed help in making them work.” Also aware of the new plan for a late start to school one day a month, she added, “Hopefully, the new late start will be a move in giving them what they need.” By acknowledging the need for more time and other necessary resources, the
district leaders showed they were aware of the need to be more diligent in providing what they perceived as needs of the teachers. The district leaders believed they were aware of what the teachers needed for professional development and they held themselves responsible for providing it.

**Administrator responsibility.** Another theme that emerged from the data was the school administrator’s responsibility to provide professional learning opportunities for teachers. All four district leaders believed building level administrators held this responsibility. The district leaders referenced the importance of meeting the needs of each individual school. The district leaders perceived this responsibility to be the school administrators because the administrators “know what happens in the classroom on a daily basis.” According to comments shared by district leaders, the building administrators had “first-hand information about the individual teacher’s needs,” making them responsible for providing professional development for their teachers.

It was noted that principals “should move in the direction” of supporting their teachers’ professional learning needs because that “is the job of the principal.” Mrs. Faye indicated the principals should be focused on answering two big questions: “How can they implement professional development?” and “How can they identify areas that need to be addressed in their building?” It appears that the district leaders see school administrators responsible for providing learning opportunities for teachers as the district leaders’ comments focused on what the school administrators should provide for teachers.

Further illustrating that district leaders perceived school administrators to be responsible for providing professional learning opportunities to teachers, Mrs. Faye offered
an exemplar of one school that took the vision given by the district and expanded that vision to meet the needs of their own staff. She added that when the principal provided a focus for his or her school based on identifying the needs of that staff, expectations were set for that school. Mrs. Faye explained it as setting expectations for teachers and that the teachers were responsible “for working with the principal to make sure” the expectations were met.

The principals as responsible agents for providing professional learning opportunities for teachers continued to surface through district leaders’ comments. Phrases such as “identify where the needs are,” “told the teachers,” and “developed a focus for teachers” all supported the theme of administrator’s responsibility. Ms. Cone may have best captured the idea of the principal’s responsibility by stating the principals “own that school.”

**Attitude.** Another theme that emerged focused on the role that attitudes played in the success of PLCs. Two subthemes were identified: teacher attitude and administrator attitude.

**Teacher attitude.**

According to the district leaders, teachers’ attitudes contributed to either success or failure of a PLC. Illustrating the importance that teachers’ attitudes played in the PLC process were statements such as “Teachers and employees should want to continue their education.”; “Their role is to want to grow.” and “If they don’t want to grow, we can’t force it down them.” District leaders indicated that the attitudes of teachers have a direct
impact on what happens with the structure of a PLC. It was noted that sometimes teachers view the PLC process as “hokey” and therefore they are “reluctant” to put forth the effort it takes to make a PLC work.

The power of a positive attitude was mentioned and explained as teachers having the right “mindset going in.” According to Ms. Cone, “attitude is everything” and “the ones who are naysayers are not going to learn anything.” Ms. Cone offered a personal reflection to illustrate her point that teachers who take part in the PLC with a positive attitude learn something from the experience when she shared her thoughts about meetings she used to attend. She explained that before she stopped thinking “this didn’t pertain to me” she received no benefit from the meetings. Ms. Cone indicated teachers were the same when they approached PLCs with a negative attitude. She believed those teachers who wanted to learn from the process would learn, but those who chose not to learn would continue to see it as a useless experience.

Mr. Scotch also agreed that teachers’ attitudes determined success of PLCs. He talked about the attitudes of teachers when he discussed teachers who had “been doing this for a long time” because they tended to approach activities with the negative attitude of “I’ve heard that before or I already know that.” He said when teachers approach anything with this kind of mindset, they shut down. Interestingly, it was noted that while Mr. Scotch believed teachers should approach PLCs and professional development with a positive attitude, he also believed it was important for leaders to be cognizant of the fact that every teacher did not approach learning with the same desire. The general consensus among district leaders appeared to be that teachers will experience growth while partici-
participating in PLCs when they choose to do so. It was apparent that district leaders believed that teachers’ attitudes impacted what occurred during a PLC.

*Administrator attitude.*

Administrators’ attitudes were deemed important as well as indicated by comments from district leaders. Ms. Lola believed success started with the attitudes of the school administrators. She indicated that the way an administrator presented information to teachers about the PLC was important in determining its success. She gave the example of some principals not wanting to allow teachers the time to meet because of other priorities. To her, that did not promote what the district wanted to accomplish. She also stated that the way administrators model their own learning was of great importance. She told the story of one principal who always complained about what his teachers would not do. She attributed his complaints to the attitude he presented to his teachers calling it the “stinkiest attitude in the world” and acknowledging that when principals have this kind of attitude it “gives their faculty nothing good to see or think about” because “it’s a negative from the get go.”

Other district leaders also supported the idea that administrators were responsible for portraying a positive attitude. When talking about approaching PLCs with teachers, comments such as “principals really have to convince people” why participating in PLCs is important and principals need to “approach PLCs at their school as the best thing ever” helped explain how district leaders perceived the importance of attitudes displayed by administrators. The district leaders’ comments suggested teachers perform better in PLCs when their principals positively promote the process.
Collaboration. Another theme that emerged from the data was the idea of collaboration. Two subthemes were identified: professional learning and dialogue.

Professional learning.

Data suggested district leaders believed a connection existed between collaboration and professional learning. All district leaders offered personal examples of how they had grown as a professional when given the opportunity to collaborate with others. Ms. Cone identified a professional learning activity she had been involved in with a group of educators and cited that the best part of the experience was the collaboration with other individuals. With excitement in her voice, she reminisced about being a part of a learning academy with educators from all over the country. She described it as a constant communication among group members where they would talk to one another, submit proposals to one another and receive continual feedback from one another. According to Ms. Cone, it was the best learning experience she had ever had because it was a constant form of collaboration.

When I asked how that experience could be applied to the school setting, Ms. Cone said that whenever teachers worked together it moved them from an isolated classroom into a collaborative setting. She indicated that education can be a lonely profession because teachers can “shut the door” and no one really knows “what goes on in that classroom.” With collaboration, she believed that everyone could benefit because it promoted “quality instruction in all classrooms.”

A personal story from Ms. Lola further supported the idea that professional learning occurred when teachers collaborated. She believed that it was crucial for teachers to
work together and as an example she included how she had worked with her mentor in order to learn what she needed for her new position. She described the experience with her mentor as “the most effective collaboration” because it allowed her to work with someone who had more knowledge than she did and she was able to use that collaboration as a tool for acquiring new knowledge.

When I questioned Mr. Scotch about his thoughts on professional learning, he supported the idea that professional learning comes from people working together to make necessary changes. Perhaps the perceived benefits of collaboration were best summed with Mr. Scotch’s idea that professional learning was “a collaborative effort.” District leaders believed that collaboration provided one avenue for learning to occur.

*Dialogue.*

District leaders also perceived dialogue was another avenue that led to collaboration. Examples of conversations were offered by the district leaders to support the idea that dialogue was a method of collaboration. Ms. Lola’s example was a conversation with her mentor. Mrs. Faye and Ms. Cone commented about the person they go to for discussing new ideas and new ways of approaching an idea. Mr. Scotch added that even though he typically prefers to be given information and allowed to process it himself, he does enjoy and benefits from conversations with other people. He considered hearing “others’ ideas” as “powerful.”

After listening to his comments, I asked if the best part of a PLC was the collaboration. Mr. Scotch added that when teachers begin talking together and collaborating with one another then “aha moments” do happen and that is a positive consequence for having
conversations. According to the district leaders, dialogue among the teachers created an opportunity for learning.

**Authentic learning.** The fifth theme that emerged was authentic learning. The theme emerged from asking participants to explain how they knew they had really learned something. Two subthemes were identified: behavioral change and authentic learning in a PLC.

**Behavioral change.**

When I asked participants to explain how they knew they had really learned something, behavioral change emerged as a subtheme. Each district leader cited a personal change that had occurred as an indicator of authentic learning. Ms. Cone explained that she knew she had learned something new when she changed what she thought. She continued to explain that she typically had very strong ideas about topics. However, when she was presented with new information that helped to alter her own ideas, then it was a learning experience for her because she began “to think differently.” Ms. Cone illustrated her point by referencing an activity that she had completed with a group of colleagues. She said they were at first presented with a problem and she had her own solution in mind; however, after hearing from others in the group, she realized she did not necessarily have all the information she needed to make a decision. She realized she had learned something in that case because her solution to the problem was different than it had been.

Ms. Lola agreed that authentic learning for her happened when a change occurred. She acknowledged that she knew she had learned something when she had “to sit and
think” and then “do something based on that.” Applying new knowledge was cited by district leaders as an indicator of authentic learning. The participants all cited changes in behavior or mindset as being a behavior that was “immediately applied.” Comments such as “immediately start thinking about application” and “the part that I can play” supported the subtheme of behavioral change.

In a PLC.

According to the comments from the district leaders, PLCs provided a structure for authentic learning to occur. District leaders suggested that teachers learn in “a true PLC where teachers are talking about a problem or a purpose or student data and they are working together toward an end product.” One example offered by Mrs. Faye explained how her resource teachers in her department worked together as a PLC frequently. According to her, the process was an authentic learning experience because “they learn something new every week and then they are equipped to take it to other teachers who are on the front lines in the schools.”

While the district leaders perceived the PLC to be an avenue leading to authentic learning, they stipulated that learning in the PLC occurred if “the PLC is done correctly.” The sentiment among the district leaders appeared to suggest that although learning could certainly come from a PLC, the determining factor really was how the teachers approached the process. If the PLCs were deemed important by those participating in the PLC, then it became “invaluable learning.” The experience was thought to be valuable because it allowed teachers to learn from “the strengths of people.” The district leaders il-
illustrated successful examples of the PLC process by reflecting upon their own experiences as participants involved in PLCs.

Table 1

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<td>District Responsibility</td>
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<td>Focus</td>
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<td>Administrator Responsibility</td>
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<td>In a PLC</td>
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**Case Study Two: High School Administrators**

Nine high schools were a part of Sunshine School District. Each school within the district was responsible for creating a Continuous School Improvement Plan based on the needs of that school. The nine high schools portrayed the diverse socio-economic and demographic population of the district. The high schools were located in both suburban and rural areas of the district.

**Participating Schools**

Administrators from four high schools within Sunshine School District participated in the study.
**High school A.** High School A had an enrollment 1,752 students, 94 faculty members, and 5 administrators. High School A, located in the northern part of the district, has won numerous academic awards and recognitions over the last 10 years. Students consistently scored above the national average on the American College Testing (ACT) assessment; almost one-third of the student population was identified as gifted. High School A reported that PLCs met every two weeks to develop learning, write essential questions, create formative assessments, and adjust instruction based on the gathered information. Administration at High School A provided an agenda for the PLCs to follow for each meeting.

**High school B.** The enrollment for High School B was 922 students, 65 faculty members, and three administrators. High School B, located in the southern part of the district has seen tremendous growth within the last 3 years. High School B had fewer than 20% of its students meeting college readiness benchmarks on the ACT. High School B reported PLCs met weekly during their lunch time and once a month they met during an intervention period that was covered by other teachers. The administrators provided an agenda and collected notes from the PLCs.

**High school C.** High School C housed 658 students, 51 faculty members, and two administrators. Over the last 3 years, High School C has participated in a state initiative to increase enrollment in advanced placement courses. They have seen their advanced placement options for students increase and the numbers of students taking these courses also increased. High School C began the PLC process before it was mandated by the dis-
strict. The administration did not provide an agenda for the PLCs to follow; however, the administrators met with the PLCs. There was a schedule in place for the PLCs to have job-embedded meeting time once a week.

**High school D.** Enrollment for High School D was 597 students, 44 faculty members, and two administrators. Seventy-five percent of students taking the ACT at High School D scored below the national average. The administrators provided an agenda for the PLCs to follow and they collected evidence from the PLCs after the meetings ended. The PLCs met weekly as subject area departments.

**Participating Administrators**

As a means of protecting identity, each school administrator chose a pseudonym and was not identified according to school.

- Ms. Smith had been in education for 21 years. Before becoming an administrator, she taught psychology at the high school level for three different school systems. She had been employed as an administrator with Sunshine School District since 2009.

- Mr. Jones had been in education for 16 years. He taught high school English in a neighboring school system before becoming an administrator for Sunshine Schools in 2007.

- Mrs. Dee had been in education for 27 years. Her entire career had been with Sunshine Schools. She left the classroom as an English teacher and moved into administration in 2007.
• Mrs. Kone had been in education for 24 years. Prior to spending 15 years in administration, she was a high school math teacher. She had been an administrator in Sunshine District since 2005.

• Mr. Jolly had been in education for 27 years. He had been employed with Sunshine Schools as an administrator for 13 years. Before entering administration, he was a high school English teacher in another district.

Themes

Each school administrator presented his or her perspective about how PLCs support high school teachers’ professional learning. Based on data collected from the administrators, five themes were identified: administrator responsibility, district responsibility, attitude, collaboration, and authentic learning. Subthemes were also identified for each indicated theme (See Table 2).

Administrator responsibility. One theme identified was the role that administrators played in supporting the PLC process at the school level. All five administrators expressed the importance of being involved as a leader and supporting PLCs as a method of professional learning for their teachers. Three subthemes were identified that dealt with the administrators’ responsibilities: focus professional learning for teachers, structure PLCs, and monitor PLCs.
Focus professional learning for teachers.

Data collected from the interviews showed the administrators perceived they were responsible for helping teachers acquire new knowledge and skills. It appeared that the administrators believed they were responsible for providing learning opportunities for their teachers. When I asked what the administrator’s role was in providing professional learning for teachers, answers such as “identify a need,” “find resources,” and “make sure it works” described the administrators’ perceptions of their responsibility. The administrators perceived their involvement as helping the teachers because the teachers were “strapped for time” and would not be able to accomplish the task on their own.

The administrators believed they were responsible for giving the teachers “starting off points” in order for the teachers to improve as professionals and be able to move forward with their learning. This was also evident in the planning document that Mr. Jones shared with me. He planned three days of professional development activities for his faculty to participate in at the beginning of the school year based on his summary of what his faculty needed for training. He acknowledged that he had made the decision to focus on certain needs based on his perceptions of what the faculty needed. Further supporting the administrative responsibility theme, Mr. Jones giggled when he mentioned that it might have been a good idea to seek teacher input.

The administrators saw themselves to be the facilitators of learning for their teachers as evidenced by comments such as “I feel like I am one of the people who helps facilitate our professional development.” However, their comments also served to underscore a perception that their responsibility for providing learning opportunities for teachers stemmed from a lack of trust in their teachers’ abilities to pursue their own profes-
sional learning. Comments such as “keep an eye” on their learning and “crafting [their learning] in a way that works” suggested that while the administrators were responsible, the responsibility might be for different reasons other than providing a focused approach to professional learning. It was clear that the administrators were the deciders of which activities the teachers were provided as they saw their role as understanding the “bigger vision” and being able to “figure out” how that vision applied to teachers.

Each administrator explained how the “focus for the new year” was provided. The focus was created based on what the administrators perceived as needs of the teachers. While explaining her school’s focus for the new school year, Mrs. Kone mentioned that she had created the plan for the upcoming school year. She saw the need to provide for her teachers a content specific focus. Again, the administrator was the active participant in deciding and providing activities for the teachers. Although the responsibility to provide learning opportunities for the teachers created “more work” for the administrators, it was done because the administrators felt the teachers needed “the support” because they were “feeling stressed…with everything that they [were] facing.” The administrators felt a strong responsibility to provide professional learning activities for their teachers. Those activities were created based on what the administrators believed their teachers needed.

Structure PLCs.

Another subtheme that emerged as an administrative responsibility was offering structure for the PLC process. Four of the five administrators agreed that teachers required a format to follow for the PLC to be effective. Administrators suggested that “resistance” was an issue with PLCs because there would always be some teachers who did
not want to participate. However, they believed that providing a “structure was important to help with resistance as well as keep teachers focused on the established professional development.” Without a provided structure, the administrators commented that the PLC conversations would “devolve” or “disintegrate into complaining or gossiping.”

Administrators felt that a good way to “guard” what happened in a PLC was to set an agenda for the teachers to follow. The agendas provided required “guiding questions” that were seen to ensure that teachers had something to discuss. It was believed that teachers needed a format to guide their discussions because if teachers were told to “talk about teaching” they would not know where to begin or how to proceed.

Although four administrators perceived providing structure as an important element to ensure success of the PLC, the structure they provided appeared more as a way to monitor that teachers accomplished a task while meeting in their PLCs. The administrators saw providing structure as a positive addition to the PLC process.

One administrator did recognize that structure may or may not be needed. Mr. Jolly stated when his faculty first began utilizing the PLC process, his teachers needed a structured and guiding question. However, it was different now for his faculty. He stated, “For a while, it was the idea of “What do you want us to work on?” and now it is “What do we need to work on?” Elaborating his point, he added that there had been times when his teachers were not sure what they should be doing in their PLCs and it had been a struggle; however, he said that he always reminded them of the purpose of a PLC, but he did not always provide them a topic of the PLC. Interestingly, it was also Mr. Jolly’s school that had begun implementing PLCs before the district mandated PLCs as a method of professional development. This may account for his different approach to the process
as he indicated that his PLCs were a partnership between the administration and the
teachers.

**Monitor PLCs.**

While the idea of monitoring a PLC meant different things to the administrators,
each agreed that monitoring the PLCs produced effective outcomes. However, it was un-
clear what was actually accomplished through the monitoring process. It appeared that
monitoring to the administrators meant they were informed as to whether teachers were
participating in the meetings. It did not appear that monitoring actually indicated an ef-
fective PLC collaboration among teachers. The process was rigid and was set by the ad-
ministrators as a method of documentation that groups of teachers were meeting. There
appeared to be little authentic monitoring of a true collaboration among teachers.

Mr. Jones expressed his concern over the need to supervise what was happening
in the PLCs at his school when he told me about a new schedule he created. He gave his
teachers a duty free lunch in order for them to have time to meet as a PLC. While he was
proud this opportunity existed, he was nervous that no administrator would be able to at-
tend the PLC meetings and “know what was happening in them.” He underscored his
nervousness when he said, “It kind of worries me a little bit because one of us will be tied
up in the lunchroom and we won’t be able to sit with the PLCs.” Obviously having al-
ready thought through the process and feeling a form of monitoring was necessary, he
added the only solution would be to have them submit agendas and notes to him.

Further developing the subtheme of monitoring PLCs, Mr. Jones gave another ex-
ample of an online PLC. He noted his online participation among teachers had dwindled
so he offered the teachers what he thought of as a choice. He told them they could have a face to face PLC with him on Friday afternoons at 3:00. Indicating a sense of satisfaction with himself, he smiled and said, “They didn’t like that option and participation was like 92% by the end of the year. It did take me monitoring and expecting it.” While this did support the administrative belief of monitoring, it also provided some irony. An “option” was considered to be at 3:00 PM; however, Mr. Jones admitted that he realized no teachers would accept that as an option. He essentially left one choice.

Mrs. Dee also credited monitoring as an important aspect to PLC success. She stated that she has her teachers turn in binders of information about students to her after each meeting. When I asked if she looked at the information, she said that she went through it about twice a year to make sure the information was correct. Correct information meant that the teachers had answered the questions set forth in the agendas.

The phrase “inspect what you expect” was used by three of the administrators. Oddly, the expectation being inspected was task oriented and provided little more than a checklist of accomplished tasks as indicated by the examples offered.

Although still supporting the subtheme of monitoring a PLC, Mr. Jolly appeared to monitor his PLCs in more of a participant format. He credited the success of his PLCs to his being present at the meetings and listening to what the teachers had to say. He saw the importance of attending the meetings and asking questions of the teachers. He perceived the best form of monitoring to be an active participant. Mr. Jolly’s approach better captured the true meaning of participating in a PLC. He expressed that if he wanted his teachers to fully engage in the PLC process, then he would need to take part in that process with them.
Although both forms of monitoring, the agendas left little leeway for teacher participation. Teachers were told what to discuss and when to discuss it. Teachers were also required to submit notes indicating what they had discussed. On the other hand, Mr. Jolly preferred a participant approach and allowed his teachers to make some of the decisions.

**District responsibility.** A second theme that emerged during the interviews focused on the role of the district in providing professional learning for teachers. Two sub-themes were identified: providing focus and providing resources.

**Providing focus.**

The administrators perceived the district to be responsible for providing a focus and a direction to follow for professional learning. It was stated that the district needed “to provide a vision” so teachers could work “toward a common goal.” The administrators appeared to be concerned that without a common direction or an established goal from the district, then teachers would only concentrate on their individual classrooms and would not be interested in working as a learning group.

**Providing resources.**

Providing resources was seen as a responsibility of the district. According to the administrators, they valued and relied on the resources currently provided by the district. They were described as “invaluable” and “made the administrators’ jobs easier.” Mrs. Kone gave an example of having worked in systems that did not offer resources. She said that she never knew where to go to find things needed for the classrooms.
According to the administrators, providing resources meant offering monetary support for professional learning opportunities and providing a time for more collaboration among teachers. The administrators felt that without the monetary support and the emphasis on providing more time for teacher collaboration, it would be difficult to promote learning at their individual schools. They were appreciative of what was offered and felt the district did a good job in meeting their responsibility to provide the needed resources.

**Attitude.** The next theme involved the impact attitude played in PLCs. Two sub-themes were identified: teacher attitude and administrator attitude.

**Teacher attitude.**

When I asked how participating in a PLC impacts classroom teaching, four of the administrators offered statements beginning with “if” and “when.” These conditional words suggested the administrators believed teachers’ attitudes were a determining factor in the success of a PLC. Administrators conveyed the idea of the impact that attitude has on a PLC with comments such as “really positive…if it’s done right” and “if they are done correctly, they will have an impact.” According to the administrators, the difference between the successful PLC and the unsuccessful one is the “willingness” of the teachers.

The administrators perceived that if negative attitudes were present, then a PLC could become a setting for nothing more than complaining. All administrators acknowledged that they had PLCs at their schools that truly did not function as PLCs. According to the administrators, this was because those teachers approached the process of only do-
ing “the bare minimum.” The administrators viewed the lack of success to be caused by a negative attitude of the teachers.

Although the data revealed the importance of teachers’ attitudes in a successful PLC, when talking about successful PLCs, all administrators offered examples of PLCs in which they had participated. Their experiences had been positive and they described those experiences as having a “huge impact” on them as learners. According to the perceptions of the administrators, if the teachers approached the PLC with a positive mindset, “they would see the value of being engaged in a PLC.”

**Administrator attitude.**

Interview data revealed that administrators perceived the attitudes held by administrators were also important in determining the impact a PLC had on changing classroom practices. Although administrators perceived teachers’ attitudes determined the success of a PLC, they also believed the way the administrators approached the process of learning during a PLC was crucial. Administrators felt the PLC process should be discussed by the administrators in a “positive light.” It was thought that approaching the process in a positive light and continuing to move “in the right direction” would eventually influence what happens in the PLCs.

It was also mentioned that how administrators approached those teachers who were involved was important. The administrators felt the process must be approached with perseverance and the attitude to “just keep going and keep trying.” According to Mrs. Kone, perseverance means that those “people you think never will get on board do.” She described that as “a great day.”
The evidence suggested that administrators see themselves somewhat responsible for the success of a PLC. They acknowledged presenting a positive attitude coupled with the determination to persevere could benefit the PLC process. However, they were more emphatic about the role the teachers’ attitudes played. According to information revealed by administrators, without a positive mindset from teachers, receiving the intended benefits of a PLC was difficult.

**Collaboration.** The strongest theme presented in this case was collaboration. All five administrators made lengthy and passionate comments about the importance of collaboration among teachers. Their comments were based on personal experiences they had had as part of a collaborative process. Two subthemes were also identified: professional learning and task oriented.

**Professional learning.**

When asked about their best professional learning activity, all administrators mentioned an activity in which they had chosen to collaborate with other educators in their field. They all indicated they had been a part of some kind of collaborative group where they learned from what others shared with them. Mrs. Kone discussed being a member of a regional best practices group and maintained the greatest benefit of being in that group was that it kept her “learning and reading and talking to colleagues and collaborating.” According to her, involvement in that group had made her a better learner. She also recalled moving to a smaller school without the collaborative process and professed, “I missed it. I missed having someone to talk to about how did you do this or how did
your kids do on that? I missed just those professional conversations about student learning.”

Mr. Jolly stated the best professional learning experience he had been a part of was learning about the PLC model from a conference he attended with other educators. With excitement in his voice, he shared how he had come home from the conference and could not wait to get started. He began talking to other people in education and meeting with them because they had different ideas and he wanted to hear what they had to say and wanted to share his ideas with them. He viewed this as not being “one of those things you go out on an island and operate, but as something that created [in him] a desire to learn more about.”

Ms. Smith also recalled her best professional learning experience as one working with other adults in her teaching field. She described a yearly event in which she participated with other educators as a “powerful collaborative process” because she was able to ask for ideas and for feedback. Ms. Smith relayed that the conversations she had with others in her field were invaluable to her as a learner because “it was so collaborative.”

The administrators perceived collaboration to be a component of professional learning because they all had first-hand experience. Because they had seen the benefits of it, they also perceived teachers to learn from collaboration. However, it was noted that collaboration “doesn’t happen overnight.” The importance of perseverance was important as the administrators believed collaboration was a process that must continually be reinforced and nurtured because it was seen as a process that “influences what is taught in the classroom.” When collaboration becomes a “give and take conversation” learning experiences were created for all involved.
**Task oriented.**

All five administrators allotted a schedule time for teachers to collaborate within the school setting. Although the administrators perceived the PLC schedule to be “a time for teachers to share ideas” and “to look at what students are doing,” administrators described what appeared to be tasks. They explained the collaboration that occurred during the PLCs with phrases such as “put a check in the box,” develop a common pacing guide,” “they do it because I ask them,” and “they don’t really engage in meaningful activities together.” The administrators acknowledged that they knew it was important for teachers to have time to collaborate. However, what they described was not true collaboration that enhanced professional learning.

**Authentic learning.** The fifth theme identified was authentic learning. The administrators were asked to describe how they knew when they had really learned something. Based on their responses, a subtheme of behavioral change was created. A second subtheme of authentic learning in PLC was also created to illustrate the administrators’ perceptions of authentic learning within the context of a high school PLC.

**Behavioral change.**

All administrators shared personal stories of experiencing a behavioral change to indicate authentic professional learning. Mrs. Dee stated that she knew she had learned something when she “couldn’t wait to use it.” She explained her descriptions with an example of attending a national conference during the summer. Mrs. Dee indicated that she
always found activities at the conference and could hardly wait to share them with teachers.

Ms. Smith’s response further supported the subtheme of behavioral change. She was aware of authentic learning because “it changes” her and it “changes something” she had done. Comments from administrators continued to reveal that a change was necessary to ensure learning. The general thought was that “learning was all about making a change.” Mr. Jones poignantly added, “If you don’t make a change, you haven’t learned anything.”

According to the administrators, a behavioral change was an indicator to authentic learning. The administrators all shared different examples of when they had learned and changed practice. Learning occurred in many situations with them and they easily described those situations.

**In a PLC.**

When I questioned adult learning in a PLC, the answers were not so forthcoming. They each had their own ideas about how learning in the context of a PLC and they each had personal examples of when they had learned something as a member of a PLC. Although Mrs. Kone had earlier discussed the use of structure and an agenda for her PLCs to follow which required the teachers to answer a preset question, she stated that adult learning should be “independent.” She felt that adults wanted to be able to “express their opinions” and not “be treated like a child.” Her answer did not support the structured PLC format she employed in her school as there was no room for independence and the teachers were told the direction to follow.
Mr. Jones talked about adult learning in a PLC as “seeds” of learning. When I asked what he meant by that, he clarified “teachers need to have the time to process and that starts when they go back into their classroom.” This falls in line with the definition of authentic learning that emerged as a theme, but Mr. Jones did not clearly indicate that it always occurred. In fact, in looking at the previous theme of collaboration, authentic learning did not appear to occur since collaboration was discussed in terms of tasks involved in a PLC.

Mrs. Dee suggested learning in a PLC was more about working with others instead of “learning anything academic.” Mr. Jolly’s answer was similar. According to him,

It’s not a formal type of learning. The adult learning that takes place to me is typically just shared ideas. If you have a good idea and I try it and it works, then boom there’s that moment that they realize the way they did it is better than the way I did it.

He ended with probably the most significant statement of any administrator, “Teachers, especially at the high school level, don’t always have those conversations to figure that out. But when it happens, it’s pretty powerful.”

Although all administrators supported the use of PLCs, their responses did not indicate that the PLC format supported adult learning. While collaboration was seen as an effective way to support learning, all administrators intimated that PLCs did not necessarily equate to collaboration. In part, this could be due to how the PLCs were structured to perform tasks. The administrators viewed attitude as a vital component in the process.
Table 2

Themes and Subthemes of How PLCs Support High School Teachers’ Professional Learning: School Administrators’ Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator Responsibility</td>
<td>Focus Professional Learning for Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Responsibility</td>
<td>Providing Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Teacher Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Learning</td>
<td>Behavioral Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In a PLC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case Study Three: High School Teachers

Three focus groups were held. The participants in each focus group had been employees of the system since the beginning of the mandatory PLC professional development model in 2007. The first focus group consisted of eight teachers and represented five different high schools in the district. The second focus group also consisted of eight teachers and represented three different high schools in the district. The third focus group consisted of nine teachers and represented four different high schools in the district. As indicated by Table 3, the number of years’ experience varied among the teachers and 13 subjects were represented.
Table 3

**Focus Group Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Years’ Experience</th>
<th>Years in System</th>
<th>Subject Taught</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pre-Calculus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joannie</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karmen</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>History</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>Journalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Calculus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
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<td>Nicole</td>
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<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Rhonda</td>
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<td>Sally</td>
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<td>Sue</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Themes**

The teachers participating in the focus groups offered their perspectives on professional learning. Based on the data collected, four themes were identified: administrator responsibility, teacher responsibility, collaboration, and authentic learning. Three of the four themes presented subthemes as indicated in Table 4.

**Administrator responsibility.** The dominant theme that emerged was the responsibility held by administrators. All teachers indicated administrators at the school level were responsible for professional learning that occurred at their school. Four subthemes
were identified: hold teachers accountable, know faculty needs, provide observation time, and offer choice.

**Hold teachers accountable.**

Teachers believed the administrators should hold teachers accountable. It became apparent that the teachers who participated in this study were the teachers who followed the rules and did what was asked of them at their school. One teacher even commented, “You know, just by the fact that we are here willing to participate with you sets us apart from other teachers in our building.” It also became apparent these teachers believed the administrators should hold all teachers accountable for participating in PLCs at the school level by mandating what needs to occur. When talking about the role of the administrators, Tim added that administrators needed to mandate that lessons be used and shared among colleagues. Seeing nods around the table, he continued to explain that administrators should also require teachers to respond to one another when ideas are shared. He indicated this was a way to learn from one another that is not currently in practice.

Phrases such as “everybody has something to offer” and that if “groundwork rules are defined by somebody in authority” were used by teachers to talk about the learning that could take place among peers if administrators held all teachers accountable. However, the teachers did not believe the current situations promoted this environment because teachers who choose not to participate “know nothing will happen” to them. One teacher used the word “accountability” to explain the role the administrator should play in a PLC. It was indicated that principals need to say, “You are all professionals and this is the way it’s going to be done. You don’t get a choice and you have to try everybody’s
idea.” Without this kind of statement, it was believed that teachers would continue to focus on only their classrooms. It was evident that this group of teachers felt the administration needed to intervene in the PLC process in order to ensure that all teachers participate. The teachers did not feel the administration was doing this.

**Know faculty needs.**

Another subtheme that emerged focused on knowing the needs of the teachers. The teachers felt administrators had a certain responsibility to know what their teachers needed for professional learning opportunities. Dawn commented that the administrators should play to the strengths of their faculty by “working with their teachers and knowing what their teachers do best.” Similar comments were made by other teachers describing that it “just makes good sense” to know which teachers were strong in which areas so those strengths could be utilized to develop other teachers. When administrators “know [their] people,” everyone benefits because it not only provides more learning opportunities for teachers but it also helps to “build culture” at the school because better groups can be formed and more can be accomplished. Although the teachers talked about the administrators knowing the needs of their teachers, it became evident that teachers wanted to be recognized for their own strengths as well. Teachers wanted to be utilized and “not have the same five people chosen” for everything. Teachers also wanted “a pat on the back” for doing a good job. It was described by one teacher as “feeling valued because [she was] good at her job.”

It was also suggested that knowing the faculty provided better professional learning opportunities for all teachers. Ginger indicated that knowing the needs of the teachers
came with asking for input from the teachers. She felt the administrators had a responsibility to inquire about what kind of professional development the teachers thought they needed instead of mandating “this is what we are going to focus on and this is what you are going to do.” Multiple stories were told of professional learning activities that had been mandated without any teacher input at all. Teachers shared specific and personal instances where their schools had decided what the focused learning should be without asking for any input from them. The general consensus was that although administrators needed to seek input of teachers before launching a professional learning activity or focus, it was not accomplished. Therefore, the teachers believed the administrators did not truly know what their teachers needed.

*Provide observation time.*

The third subtheme that emerged was the desire among teachers to have time provided to observe other teachers during the school day. The teachers shared that “part of the PLC program” should be a time to “observe someone’s classroom.” Teachers indicated that if administrators allowed them time to observe other teachers, learning would be powerful because it would be seeing “how [someone else] teaches and “incorporates the same ideas.” Other comments such as “it’s good to get to go to others’ classrooms…just to see what other people are doing” and “to get good ideas and strategies” captured the desire of the teachers. They presented a desire to learn from one another and a desire for the administrators to provide time for them to do so. According to one teacher, “Just being given the time to visit each other and see what somebody else is doing can be great.”
The teachers seemed to view observation as an excellent opportunity to grow as a professional.

Observation also was seen as a method to help teachers in isolated subjects. It was noted by participants who teach a foreign language, an art, or a career technical class that the PLCs did not work for them because these teachers were “alone in the building.” However, it was suggested that having an opportunity to visit other teachers teaching the same subject would be beneficial.

*Offer choice.*

There was much discussion about how administrators needed to offer more choice for the kind of professional learning opportunities provided to teachers. Patrice mentioned that years ago she had the opportunity to choose what she wanted to learn about. Before she could finish her sentence, Sally interrupted her to emphatically agree that “we used to get to pick ourselves.” The teachers stated that professional learning “needs to be teacher driven” instead of administrators telling the teachers what the “professional development is going to be about this year.” Sentences such as “Choice is the important part of learning.” “We need a variety of choices.” and “Teachers should be able to decide what professional development… they need…because it does us no good for someone to dictate to us what we are going to learn.” created a common belief among the teachers. The comments suggested that if professional development opportunities were only chosen by the administration, those opportunities might not interest the teachers; therefore, the teachers really did not benefit from those opportunities.
To really change classroom practices, teachers believed administrators should provide a choice in what to learn. Possessive phrases such as “my resources,” “our time,” and “our professional development” were used to indicate the teachers wanted ownership and choice in what they learned. The question, “How do they really know what is best for me?” underscores the need for choice among the participants. The need for choice was strong among the participants. They felt they were not being given the opportunity by the administration to decide for themselves what they wanted to learn or what they needed to learn. Without this opportunity, they did not believe they were truly engaged in a learning process.

**Teacher responsibility.** Another theme that emerged was that teachers were responsible for wanting to pursue more knowledge and skills. Teachers perceived themselves to be responsible for how they approached learning and believed that teachers who wanted to learn would learn. Data revealed the belief that teachers should have a desire to learn. Teachers discussed what it meant to be a teacher who learns. The general perception was teachers must learn. Mary articulated the perception clearly when she looked at me with a perplexed facial expression and asked, “How can you be a teacher if you don’t learn?” Others’ comments indicated a shared belief about learning among teachers and the fact that teachers hold learning in their own hands.

John called it “a kind of given” for teachers to be responsible for their own learning. He, too, questioned how one could be a teacher and not have a positive attitude about learning new things. Other comments such as “learning should be, ideally, self-
motivated,” supported the idea of teachers being responsible for their own learning. Teachers must “want” opportunities to learn and “approach it with a desire to learn.”

While the teachers acknowledged the responsibility of good teachers was to seek new learning experiences, they also understood that this was not the attitude of all teachers. Capturing the need for teachers to be responsible and desire new learning experiences, Nicole stated, “To be a good teacher, you have to be up to date; you should want to know more and to know the trends.” She concluded that if teachers were not responsible and did not take an active role in learning then they “may be ready for retirement because education changes and [teachers] have to be willing to learn.” In essence, the teachers believed that “nothing happens if [they didn’t] want it to happen.”

**Collaboration.** Another theme that emerged from the data was collaboration. All teachers agreed on the benefits of collaboration. Two subthemes emerged: professional learning and happens in hallways.

**Professional learning.**

All teachers concurred that they develop as professionals from collaborating with other teachers. Immediately prior to meeting as a focus group, four of the focus group participants engaged in a collaborative training that allowed them to share ideas with one another about how to teach a new set of standards for the next year. Those teachers all mentioned that it was a “very valuable” learning experience because it allowed them to collaborate with one another. They listened to one another and learned from one another as “everybody had a voice and everybody had valuable things to say.” The teachers per-
ceived this collaboration effective professional learning because they were “a group of teachers sharing ideas and strategies.”

What collaboration means to teachers was described as being able to say, “Hey, I did this lesson and it worked really great and this is how you could use it in your classroom.” Teachers perceived that teachers “do learn from other teachers’ ideas.” Teachers offered examples of how they had learned from collaborative groups in which they had participated. Professional learning was enhanced when teachers worked with other teachers as evidenced by examples the teachers shared about lessons that had changed because of communications with other educators.

The teachers intimated that collaboration with the other teachers provided learning opportunities for them. Multiple examples were shared to explain how working with groups of teachers had made them better teachers themselves.

One point of interest, however, is the fact that these teachers did offer the caveat of choice. With this caveat, the importance of choice resurfaced. While choice was a sub-theme under the theme of administrator’s responsibility, it becomes even more important as it surfaced as a condition of collaboration. All examples shared by the teachers were choices made by the teachers. They decided with whom they would collaborate and they decided what the topics of collaboration would be. According to them, collaboration was useful when they sought it and when they felt they needed it. They did not find collaboration to produce professional learning when it was in a forced situation. All examples were of the teachers being in charge of their own professional learning activities.
The resurfacing of choice also acted as an explanation to the next developed sub-theme. The next subtheme was that professional learning occurred in the hallways and teachers again chose when and with whom they would collaborate.

*Happens in hallways.*

Teachers considered the collaboration that occurred in the hallways and between classes to be an important learning experience. Teachers shared multiple examples of meeting their peers in the hallways and walking away from those peers with something to take to their class. Frank explained that “professional learning comes from...colleagues and it’s almost immediate feedback” because it is “collaboration with other teachers between classes.” Those conversations gave teachers a chance to ask, “My lesson just bombed; this is what I did; how can I tweak it?” It was noted by the teachers that whenever they posed a question to their colleagues between classes, there was always an answer or advice that could be taken directly back to the classroom. The immediate response presented by colleagues and the ability to transform practice for the next class appeared important to the teachers.

Heidi’s sentiments about collaboration in the hallways further supported the sub-theme. She indicated that meeting her colleagues between classes for collaborative conversations was almost “every single class period.” They would question one another about what had worked and what had not worked and would ask for last minute advice before the bell rang for next period. Heidi stated, “That’s where we learn.” These “impromptu conversations” offered a chance for teachers to learn from one another. Teachers described these conversations as being “effective and efficient” because teachers were
able to respond to one another immediately. According to the teachers, the immediacy of the responses allowed them to “get something from it.”

Descriptions supported the idea of impromptu collaboration in the hallways. It was again explained as receiving immediate feedback from peers and taking action in the classroom based on that feedback. Lisa described it as going “to one another between classes for both affirmation and encouragement and ideas on what to change and then [changing] it for that very next class.” The teachers deemed the collaboration in the hallways as an important part of their teaching day. They talked with one another and learned from one another. In supporting the teachers’ need for choice which also was shown under the administrator’s responsibility theme, collaboration in the hallway was a learning experience they chose and they controlled. Teachers decided with whom they would collaborate and about what they would collaborate.

**Authentic learning.** Another theme that emerged was authentic learning. Authentic learning was determined to mean how a teacher knows when he has learned something. All teachers agreed that authentic learning is an individual process. Two subthemes emerged during analysis of the data: behavioral change and not in a formal PLC.

**Behavioral change.**

All teachers agreed that authentic learning meant a change occurred with the teacher. Mary described the experience as an exciting event because a teacher “can’t wait to implement it” into the class. She added that learning means continually thinking about how an activity can be changed or improved for classroom use. Heidi described authentic
learning as knowing “Oh, that makes sense.” and a realization that something has to be done with the new information.

Three others shared examples of learning experiences in which they had participated. These learning opportunities had provided them with hands-on experiences. June talked about a week-long intensive training experience that she had attended “years ago.” She indicated that she still uses ideas from that particular experience because it provided her with new content knowledge pertinent to her subject matter. Dawn talked about what she had taken away from a recent content literacy professional development training and commented that her literature lessons changed because of what she had learned during the training. Joanie also cited a change in practice because she had been involved in a vertical teaming experience. They all indicated they learned from those experiences because they came back to their classroom and did something to change their practice.

Although the teachers shared individual examples, the subtheme was consistent among the examples. Either a change in practice or a desire to change practice occurred.

**Not in a formal PLC.**

When asked to describe learning in a PLC, the data revealed that it did not occur in their schools. Tim described the experience as non-existent. He said, “It doesn’t occur. I don’t learn when I am in a PLC.” Karmen supported the lack of learning that takes place during her PLCs when she talked about the way they were structured at her school. She indicated that the PLCs were beneficial for distributing large amounts of information to her department, but when it came time to actually learn from one another that did not happen. She mentioned time as a factor but she also mentioned that when teachers are in
their formal PLCs, the enthusiastic discussions that might have been present before the PLC “just disappear.” According to Karmen, her group learns better when it is “just casual conversation.”

Learning in PLCs was prohibited because the teachers found the structured PLC process to be forced. The idea of focusing on a particular topic prevented true collaboration that could have occurred naturally. June indicated:

Our PLCs are forced… We have to meet. We could have just had a good discussion and now we have to meet and it needs to be focused and we need to talk about such and such and it’s just a forced conversation; whereas, a day or two ago we couldn’t talk enough.

Kelly described the PLC process as being an asset to building culture. She stated, “I think it helps the culture. Our PLC actually helps the culture and the relationship amongst the department. People will say, ‘Hey my room has a leak’ and there is someone there to just support and listen.” Her description of the PLC process had nothing to do with the learning process. Although she did find value in meeting with teachers, it was not to learn from one another.

Mary described her PLC as rigid. She stated there was not really any room for flexibility so it was difficult to really learn anything because the teachers were always focused on completing an agenda that had been given to them. Again, the idea of teachers wanting to choose for themselves was noted in the rigidity of the PLC process.

In all, 14 teachers intimated their PLCs followed agendas that had nothing to do with what they did in their classrooms. PLCs were viewed as having to complete tasks. Tim captured the essence of his experience in PLCs:

Typically, learning is minimal. Sometimes I feel like they are for the purpose of meeting together and maybe it’s an administrative thing or a coordination that is
not really relevant to actually doing our job. I don’t want to say it’s busy work, but it is.

Sally described PLCs as “a list to check off” and Katie stated, “It’s something we have to do that looks good on paper, but it isn’t relevant to what we are doing in our individual classrooms.” Rhonda’s comments also captured the other teachers’ perceptions. She said, “Yeah, sometimes there are things that have to be done in a PLC like a lot of paperwork to turn into our administration. But, I wouldn’t call that learning.”

What the teachers described happening in their PLCs did not support them as learners. Whereas they found value in collaboration and working with other teachers, they perceived the PLC structure at their school as something they had to do instead of something from which they could learn as professionals. When the teachers discussed the use of agenda topics, the topics were mandated from the administration. There was no choice involved. It is obvious that choice was important to the teachers as it presented in two other themes.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator Responsibility</td>
<td>Hold Teachers Accountable</td>
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<td>Know Faculty Needs</td>
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<td>Provide Observation Time</td>
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<td>Offer Choice</td>
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<td>Teacher Responsibility</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
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<td>Happens in the Hallways</td>
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<td>Authentic Learning</td>
<td>Behavioral Change</td>
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<td>Not in a formal PLC</td>
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Case Study Four: Collective Case Study of District Leaders, High School Administrators, High School Teachers

I utilized a collective case study in order to form a holistic understanding of how all three cases perceived learning that occurred in the context of the PLC structure. This case was my quintain (Stake, 2006).

Themes

When themes across the three cases were compared, four themes emerged: administrator responsibility, attitude, collaboration, and authentic learning. All themes were shared among all three cases; however, some of the subthemes that emerged were shared by only one or two of the cases (See Table 5).

Administrator responsibility. The largest theme that emerged was the responsibility of the administrators. Data from each case indicated all three groups shared the beliefs that administrators were responsible for promoting professional learning opportunities at the school level. Focused professional learning was the only subtheme that emerged for all three groups; however, district leaders and administrators perceived the meaning of focused professional learning differently than did teachers. The idea of holding teachers accountable for what occurred in a PLC was shared by administrators and teachers. However, it was only the administrator group that thought the school administration should structure a PLC in order to ensure success. Three subthemes were identified only for the teacher case: know faculty needs, provide time for observation, and offer choice.
Focus professional learning.

Although focus professional learning emerged as a subtheme shared by all three cases, how the focus should occur was perceived differently for teachers. District level leaders and administrators saw the responsibility of the administrators as providing teachers with a focus of study throughout a school year. Each administrator and district leader talked in terms of identifying a need for the teachers based on the needs of the school. District leaders and administrators described the administrators’ role as a “micro-cosm” or “smaller version” of the district focus. The responsibility of the administrator was described in terms of “figuring out” and “applying” what the teachers needed. An important finding was the fact that no mention was made by either group of letting the teachers take part in the process.

Teachers also wanted a focused approach to professional learning. However, at no point did they indicate this was the responsibility of the district or their administrator. Teachers desired to be able to focus their own professional learning as they saw fit. There was much talk of the frustration present with the fact that administrators chose a focus without any consultation with the teachers. The frustration came across in the questions, “Why don’t they ask us what we need?” and “Why do they choose a focus for us each year instead of asking us?” Another teacher called it “zeroed in for us.” The idea emerged that teachers know what they need and they would like to be able to choose professional learning based on their own reflections of those needs. They did not want someone else to plan learning experiences for them.
Hold teachers accountable.

Two groups, administrators and teachers, described their desire to hold teachers accountable. Administrators described holding their teachers accountable for participating in PLCs in different ways. Three of the administrators described accountability as sitting with the teachers during the PLC. Two of the three indicated that without their being a part of the PLC, the process turned into a “griping” and “moaning” session. The other administrator viewed his role as a partnership. Three administrators saw accountability as their setting the agenda the teachers followed and having teachers submit notes and binders after the meeting concluded. Although this was indicated as a means of accountability, one administrator indicated that she only checked the binders about twice a year.

Teachers also indicated they wanted administrators to hold teachers accountable for participating in PLCs. They believed many teachers were allowed to decide on their own if they were going to participate. Teachers in all three focus groups voiced this concern. They wanted administrators to enforce some kind of consequence for those who did not add to the learning community. There was much discussion about defining “groundwork rules” from someone in “authority.” The word “mandating” was even used to describe the desire for administrators to intervene. Three teachers described PLCs without administrative accountability as creating a hostile situation among the teachers. The situation was described as the teachers being “at each other.” Teachers did not feel they had the authority to question what a colleague did or did not accomplish.
Structure PLC.

Administrators were the only group that felt structure was needed for the PLC process. Without offering a structure and an agenda to follow, administrators were concerned that teachers would not do what was needed in the PLC. Administrators provided guiding questions, agendas, and reflection activities. One of the administrators felt the structure provided teachers a more authentic PLC process. The administrator who had been working with PLCs longer than the other administrators did state that when his teachers first began the process, he found it necessary to give them an agenda because it showed them where they needed to go. However, he added that he had seen his faculty members grow throughout the years and most of them did not need an agenda any longer.

Interestingly, teachers from all three focus groups commented on their dislike for following an agenda set by the administrators. Teachers did not see this as a responsibility, but they did see it as an intrusion and something that stifled what teachers could achieve as a group. Four teachers actually indicated the agendas prohibited authentic collaboration and they perceived it as way administrators asserted control over them.

Know faculty needs.

Knowing faculty needs only presented as a subtheme for the teachers. They felt strongly about the responsibility of the administration to know both the strengths and weaknesses of their teachers. According to the teachers’ comments, administrators needed to be aware of what teachers’ proficiencies were. Specific examples were offered to support this assumption. Comments such as “so and so is good at technology” and “she
works well with the writing” were used to illustrate their point of how powerful it was to go to those teachers for help.

Teachers also suggested that another responsibility of the administration was to be aware of different personalities among groups. It was suggested that based on knowing these personalities, administrators had a responsibility to move those teachers into PLCs that best matched their personality. However, one teacher disagreed that groups should be reassigned. She asserted that teachers should be professional and learn to work together.

*Provide observation time.*

Another subtheme that only presented with the teachers was the responsibility of the administrators to provide time for teachers to observe other teachers. Teachers described how they learned from seeing what other teachers did instead of talking about what other teachers did. Multiple examples were given of lessons that had been used from other teachers as a result of happenstance. One teacher gave the example of walking into another teacher’s class after school one day and noticing a character map on the board. The teacher indicated that if she had not been in the classroom that afternoon, she would never had known about the character map. Another teacher gave the example being in the hallway during his planning period and overhearing a lesson his neighbor was teaching. The teacher considered himself lucky to have heard the lesson. The comment was made that education is the only profession that does not allow for observation. One teacher indicated that before the district focus moved to PLCs, teachers had been given time to observe others; however, with a frown across her face and arms crossed, she indicated that it had been taken away from them.
Offer choice.

The desire for choice among teachers in choosing professional development opportunities also presented as a subtheme for teachers. Teachers indicated a desire to be able to offer input into their own learning experiences and even questioned how the administrators could possibly know what was needed by teachers. Teachers also indicated when administrators provided learning opportunities without giving teachers a choice in what those learning opportunities were, teachers may not be interested in pursuing those opportunities.

Attitude. The second theme that emerged among all cases was attitude. All three cases proffered the importance of attitude in a productive learning environment. When district leaders, and administrators talked about whether PLCs were successful, they talked about approaching the PLC with a positive attitude. Teachers also discussed the importance of attitude. Although described as teacher responsibility in the teacher case, attitude was seen as the responsibility of the teachers. Teachers’ attitudes presented as a subtheme in both the district leader case and the administrator case. Administrators’ attitude was a subtheme for district leaders and administrators.

Teacher attitude.

Each group of educators deemed the attitude with which a teacher approached learning experiences as important to the success of the experience. They used terms such as “desire,” “mindset,” and “want to” to describe teachers' attitudes that impact growth as a professional. District leaders and administrators included examples that were of teach-
ers who participated in PLCs with a positive attitude and teachers who participated in PLCs with a negative attitude. They used conditional statements such as “if it’s done right,” and “nothing happens if you [the teachers] don’t want it to happen,” and “can’t force it down them” to indicate that teachers’ attitudes determined success or failure of the PLC process. Teachers gave examples of approaching learning with a positive attitude; however, teachers did not associate a positive attitude with a successful PLC. Teachers associated it with teachers being responsible to continue pursuing learning opportunities. This created a disconnect in beliefs among the teachers and the leaders.

**Administrator attitude.**

Although teachers did not describe the administrators’ attitude as an important factor, district leaders and administrators voiced the significance of administrators’ attitudes in a productive PLC process. Both of these groups expressed the idea that the way administrators approached the PLC process was crucial to its success. Phrases such as “positive approach,” “positive attitude,” “convince teachers,” and “best thing ever” were used to describe the attitude that administrators believed must be used in talking about the PLC process with their teachers. According to district leaders and administrators, the way administrators delivered information to teachers about PLC participation helped to determine success.

**Collaboration.** Collaboration emerged as a theme among all three cases. Each group perceived the importance of collaboration with others and each group described
collaboration with others to enhance professional learning, creating one subtheme that bridged all three cases.

Administrators and teachers perceived collaboration occurred in different settings. Administrators discussed collaboration that occurred in PLCs; however, the descriptions detailed tasks to be completed, not real collaboration. Teachers described collaboration as occurring in the hallways. Thus, two unconnected subthemes emerged.

**Professional learning.**

Each group discussed how professional learning occurred with interactions between groups of teachers. Each group cited examples of professional learning that had occurred in a collaborative setting among other education professionals. Phrases such as “valuable learning experience,” “best professional development opportunity,” “give and take conversation,” and “powerful” were used to describe the professional learning that occurred during collaboration. Each group indicated professional learning was powerful because it gave educators an opportunity to discuss how things were accomplished by peers who experienced similar circumstances. All groups agreed that learning occurred during collaboration because it allowed the opportunity to have dialogue with one another.

**Task oriented.**

All five administrators described their role in providing collaboration for their teachers as carving out time for them to do so. Phrases such as “putting a check in the box,” “develop common pacing guides,” and “chance to complain” were used to describe
PLC time at the school level. While the administrators acknowledged PLCs benefit student achievement, administrators discussed them in terms of isolated agendas to be covered instead of meaningful conversations among teachers to improve learning or change practice. It appeared that the administrators believed in the process; however, administrators may lack training in supporting the process among teachers. By creating these structured environments and not recognizing that the structure prohibited collaboration, professional learning among teachers was stifled. The teachers perceived the very same agenda format as an intrusion. The agendas were viewed as being disconnected to what was actually happening in the classroom.

_Happens in hallways._

Although not acknowledged by district leaders and administrators, teachers described collaboration as having a conversation in between classes in the hallways. Teachers cited examples of talking to peers after a class and asking for advice on how to teach the lesson better to the next class. The phrase “immediate feedback” was used to describe the benefit of this kind of conversation. The word “impromptu” was also used and teachers indicated that this kind of conversation changed their classroom practice immediately. Teachers received both affirmation and encouragement from their peers on questions they posed. Collaboration in the hallways allowed the teachers to be reflective because they sought answers to what they knew recognized as an area of weakness for them.
**Authentic learning.** Authentic learning appeared as a theme across all three cases. A common subtheme was behavioral change as all three groups agreed that authentic learning ensued when a change in practice occurred. However, the groups did not agree that authentic learning occurred during the PLC process. District leaders and administrators both described authentic learning as transpiring during a PLC if the teachers approached the process with an open mindset; however, teachers did not view the PLC as a place which promoted authentic learning. Therefore, two additional subthemes were noted: in a PLC and not in a formal PLC.

**Behavioral change.**

All three groups agreed that an indicator of authentic learning was when a change in practice occurred. Phrases such as “can’t wait to implement it,” “you know you are going to use it,” “putting it into practice,” and “do something based on it” were used to describe what the three groups of educators did when they had truly learned something. They all agreed it was the change in practice that indicated true learning. What they did not agree on was when this change occurred.

**In a PLC.**

District leaders and administrators described participating in a PLC as a means of authentic learning. District leaders gave examples of when they had been a part of a PLC and had gained valuable information as evidence to support the idea that authentic learning occurred in the context of a PLC structure. District leaders also indicated learning that occurred during a PLC did so because teachers worked together with a focused approach.
Administrators identified authentic learning in a PLC as the sharing of ideas between teachers. They also gave examples of how they had participated in PLCs as a pathway to authentic learning. Although they described what authentic learning was in a PLC, they agreed that many times it did not occur at the high school level and cited teacher attitude as one determining factor.

_Not in a formal PLC._

Teachers discussed what occurred during a PLC and it was apparent that they did not believe authentic learning transpired during the PLC setting. They used phrases such as “rigid,” “minimal,” “busy work,” “tasks to complete,” and “forced” to describe what happened in their PLCs. They felt as if they were forced to meet as a PLC, follow an agenda that often times had nothing to do with what was happening in their classrooms. They described the PLCs as a waste of their time and as “something that looked good on paper.” One teacher even stated that she and her colleagues could talk about math instruction for hours, but when they met as a PLC, they stopped collaborating as a group.

Whereas teachers perceived collaboration to support professional learning, they did not perceive the PLC to do the same. The difference between the two forms of collaboration appeared to be connected to choice. This was the underlying theme for the teachers. They wanted choice; they expected choice, and they learned when choice was offered.
Table 5

Themes and Subthemes of How PLCs Support High School Teachers’ Professional Learning: Across Three Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Focus Professional Learning for Teachers (D, A, T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hold Teachers Accountable (A, T)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure PLC (A)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know Faculty Needs (T)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide Observation Time (T)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Teacher Attitudes (D,A,T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator Attitudes (D,A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Professional Learning (D,A,T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task Oriented Happens in Hallways (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Learning</td>
<td>Behavioral Change In a PLC (D,A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not in a Formal PLC (T)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note of cases: D=district; A=administrators; T=teachers. *Parentheses indicate case where subthemes were present.

Research Questions Answered

The following research question guided this study:

Do professional learning communities support high school teachers’ professional learning?

The answer to this question came through in the identification of themes and a discussion throughout the paper:

- Administrator responsibility: Administrators were seen to be responsible for providing a clear focus for professional learning at the school level. However, professional learning did not necessarily equate to learning in a PLC.
• Attitude: Attitude was noted to be a significant factor in promoting professional learning both as an individual learner and as a participant in a PLC.

• Collaboration: Collaboration was seen to be an important aspect of professional learning. District leaders, administrators, and teachers agreed that learning occurred through collaboration. However, collaboration was not limited to a formal PLC setting nor did participation in PLC guarantee collaboration.

• Authentic learning: All three groups of participants agreed that authentic learning changed practice. Although, district leaders and administrators believed that authentic learning occurred during a PLC, teachers perceived the PLCs to be rigid and inflexible and not conducive to authentic adult learning.

The central research question was reinforced by the following sub-questions. Thematic analysis was also employed to answer the sub-questions.

1. Do district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers view participation in a PLC as a means of teachers’ professional growth?

• District leaders view participation in a PLC as helping a teacher grow if the teacher has the right attitude about the experience. Conditional statements indicating that the decision to grow professionally was really dependent upon the teachers’ attitudes were used to signify the effective experience of PLC participation.

• High school administrators also viewed participation in a PLC dependent upon the teachers’ attitude. They used conditional statements
to indicate that attitude determined the effectiveness of the PLC experience.

- High school teachers did not view formal PLC participation as a means of promoting professional growth. They indicated the experience was rigid and inflexible, thereby prohibiting their own learning.

My research findings portend that from a leadership point of view, PLC effectiveness was based on teacher attitude, thus supporting findings by (Maloney & Konza, 2011).

The teacher perceptions in this study were in direct relation with other research findings which reveal teachers had different ideas on how a PLC should be structured. Schools often mandate the PLC process for teachers based on a set of predetermined guidelines, thus preventing a real PLC to form (Lee & Shaari, 2012; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Wood, 2007a). Professional growth occurs when teachers’ personalities, skills, and professional development needs are considered (Garet et al., 2001; Hirsh & Hord, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009).

2. Does participation in a PLC impact thinking about professional growth and professional development?

- District leaders perceived PLC participation to impact thoughts about professional growth. The system’s professional development model was developed around the concept of PLCs. District leaders viewed collaboration of educators as an important factor in promoting student achievement. District leaders believed teachers learn from one another
and that the district leaders continued to promote and support this model of professional learning.

- High school administrators perceived participation in a PLC impacted professional growth. Administrators cited their own examples of how they had grown professionally as well as cited examples of how they had witnessed their teachers grow and learn.

- High school teachers did not hold the same ideas as district leaders and administrators. While collaboration was an important part of professional growth to them, PLCs were viewed as tasks to be completed not a place for developing as a professional.

Research findings support the perceptions of district leaders, high school administrators and high school teachers in that all three groups perceived collaboration among teachers an important aspect of learning (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). Their perceptions were supported by educational organizations across the country, all emphasizing the importance of teacher collaboration (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; "Learning Forward," 2012; "National Board for Professional Teaching Standards," 2007).

However, while the district leaders and high school administrators believed the PLC structure provided this kind of collaboration because the PLCs worked together on a common focus, high school teachers did not. The teachers’ perceptions supported other research that indicates learning does not occur merely because adults are placed in groups and given a task to accomplish (Hassanien, 2007).
3. To what extent does participation in a PLC impact classroom teaching?

- District leaders indicated successful implementation of PLCs changed classroom practice.
- High school administrators perceived classroom teaching to change as a result of teachers participating in PLCs.
- High school teachers indicated that they changed practice based on informal collaboration with their colleagues; however, they did not perceive formal PLCs to impact their classroom practices.

Leaders at both the district level and the school level held beliefs supported by earlier research which indicates that classroom practice does change as a result of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005). However, high school teachers who participated in this study told a very different story.

High school teachers’ perceptions were also supported by research findings which suggest learning can occur in an informal group format (Cockrell et al., 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

4. Are there benefits for teachers from participating in PLCs?

- All groups agreed that collaboration benefited teachers; however, their definition of when collaboration occurred differed among groups.
- District leaders and high school administrators thought the PLC format provided time for collaboration.
- High school teachers thought that collaboration occurred more informally and was stifled by the PLC process.
District leaders and high school administrators were in agreement with a study conducted by Linder et al. (2012) which concluded teachers became energized while working together in PLCs, thereby promoting collaboration among group members. However, participants in their study taught elementary and middle school.

Teachers’ perceptions were supported by other research which indicates the PLCs were structured from a top down approach and offered little say in the focus and direction of discussion among its members (Lee & Shaari, 2012). Teacher perceptions were also reinforced by research findings that revealed active learning can take place in informal group settings (Barth, 1991; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Knapp, 2003).

5. What difficulties arise for teachers while participating in PLCs?

- All three groups indicated lack of time for PLC participation.
- High school administrators and high school teachers perceived managing relationships to be an issue for PLC participation.
- High school teachers viewed the PLCs for isolated subjects such as foreign language and fine arts as problematic because there was no one for those teachers to really collaborate with. They were placed in a PLC that really did not match their subject area.

Earlier research supports what all three groups perceived about time being an issue for PLCs (Bezzina, 2006). Time is a limited resource and it is difficult for teachers to set aside such a resource for PLCs (Maloney & Konza, 2011).

Group relationships must be mastered in order for the PLC to be effective. Dooner, Mandzuk, and Clifton (2008) suggested that members of a PLC “are often unprepared, and then frustrated, by inevitable groups tensions” (p. 564). Their research find-
ings indicated that teachers are unprepared to manage the stages of a PLC because they have not been taught to do so.

Characteristics of effective professional development support what teachers believed about PLCs not benefitting those who teach isolated subjects. Effective professional development calls for activities that are deemed important to the individual teacher and not detached from authentic learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Effective professional development characteristics are considered to provide content knowledge, teaching practices, teaching content in a specific way, and curriculum materials that can be used to support student performance (Garet et al., 2001). A PLC comprised of teachers teaching different subjects makes it difficult to allow for these criteria.

6. How do district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers perceive their role in ensuring professional learning occurs while participating in a PLC?

- District leaders perceived their role to be one of providing resources to teachers. Recently, they adopted a new late start policy to provide more time for the process.

- High school administrators viewed their role as providing structure for the PLC process.

- High school teachers perceived their role in PLC participation as following the checklist and guidelines set by the administrators. Teachers did not believe they learned professionally as a member of their PLC and teachers did not feel a responsibility to hold other colleagues accountable.
District leaders’ perceptions were supported by earlier research indicating the importance of providing needed resources for PLCs. The district has provided job-embedded time to focus on PLCs because district leaders agreed with others that teaching will improve when teachers have an opportunity to work together in a structured environment to discuss student achievement (Loertscher, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006).

The views of high school administrators were supported by the work of DuFour et al. (2005). The administrators agreed that teaching quality will improve when teachers are provided with a structured PLC format. However, those ideas were in disagreement with a 3-year longitudinal study which indicated minimal growth in PLC practices at 24 high schools studied (Wells & Feunn, 2007; 2008).

High school teachers did not perceive teachers have a role in ensuring PLC learning. This is supported by Wells and Feunn’s (2007; 2008) research findings which indicated teachers enjoy collaborating, but teachers did not see the PLC as a factor to promote a change in their practice. Bezzina (2006) revealed the same about secondary teachers’ perceptions. Teachers do not perceive collaboration in a PLC will benefit their learning.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Schools and districts across the United States herald their implementation of PLCs as a model for professional learning. However, evidence suggests that this implementation is often done without a clear focus on the core principles of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005). In reality, many PLCs continue to focus on routines and curriculum content (Tarnoczi, 2006). Even though an abundance of research presents the benefits of PLCs in enhancing student achievement (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2009), getting teachers to fully engage in a meaningful PLC is difficult (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggested an array of learning opportunities associated with participation in PLCs; however, limited research exists exploring high school teachers’ views about PLC participation as a means of professional learning.

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore what district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers in a large school district in the southeastern part of the United States thought about participating in PLCs as a form of professional learning for teachers. The highlighted district had already developed, implemented and continued to support a professional development model supporting PLCs. I included three cases, district leaders, high school administrators, and high school teachers in this study in order to explore their different perspectives. Choosing my fourth case as my quintain (Stake, 2006), I utilized a cross-case synthesis among the three cases, in order to
explore commonalities and differences among the groups. Therefore, analysis was executed at two levels: within each separate case and across the three cases. I assessed the credibility of my findings by acknowledging my biases, triangulating the data, member checking, including thick, rich descriptions, and conducting an audit trail.

Findings

This qualitative multiple case study generated four themes and a variety of sub-themes to answer the central research question and sub-questions. The themes were administrator responsibility, attitude, collaboration, and authentic learning. While each theme produced one subtheme among all three cases, other subthemes were found to be indicative of either teachers’ perceptions, administrator’s perceptions, or administrative and district leaders’ perceptions. One sub-theme was shared between teachers and administrators.

Administrator Responsibility

Cross-case analysis revealed each group perceived high school administrators played an important role in what occurred during a PLC. Participants from all three cases communicated the belief that administrators were responsible for offering a focus for teachers’ professional learning. However, what that focus needed to be differed among two of the cases. District leaders and high school administrators believed the responsibility of the local school administrator was to identify a school need and structure the PLC process to meet that individual school problem. This is supported by other research findings which indicate that effective PLCs have their focus directed and aligned (Doolittle,
Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). According to Doolittle et al., PLCs do not function without a concentrated directive provided by school leadership.

High school teachers indicated that although it was not the current norm, high school administrators had a responsibility to offer teachers a choice of what teachers needed to learn and what teachers needed to discuss during the PLC process. Teachers likened their need for choice to what occurs in a project-based learning classroom where students are allowed to choose topics to explore. Teachers desired the same—a choice in what they should pursue as professional learning. Adults desire self-direction in their learning and view themselves as responsible learners who will do what needs to be done (Knowles, 1990; Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Adult learners need to be regarded by others as capable of acquiring new information and knowing what to do with that new information and adults find discomfort and irritation with any kind of situation that treats them as a student rather than an adult (Knowles, 1990; Knowles & Associates, 1984; Knowles et al., 2011). The teachers’ perceptions support earlier findings that contend teachers must have some decisions over how and what teachers learn in order for practice to change (Gregson & Sturko, 2007; Sturko & Gregson, 2009). Wood (2007) contended that unless teachers are given some control over what teachers learn in the PLC format, teachers will find no benefit in it as a learning tool for them.

Sunshine School District has focused the PLC implementation based on DuFour et al. (2006). Leaders at both the district and school levels continue to structure the PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2005 DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2008). Since the district has followed the suggested criteria for successful implementation in all of its schools, it makes sense that a subtheme emerged indicating the need to offer struc-
ture for PLCs at their school level emerged. Administrators felt teachers would derail PLC meetings if administrators did not offer a structured approach. There appeared to be a lack of trust on the administrators part that teachers would take the lead for their own professional learning. Administrators were focused on having their teachers follow agendas and submit notes to account for what happened in their PLC time. According to the principals, the agendas and notes helped hold the teachers accountable. These findings further support other research that portends school leaders should establish procedures and goals so that PLCs will become more than group meetings (Lieberman & Miller, 2011).

Although the teachers also indicated a need for accountability, it was not in the form of notes or agendas. They wanted their administrators to be responsible for changing the behavior of teachers who did not commit to collaboration. Teachers believed that the administrators had a responsibility to hold all PLC members to the same standard. Teachers did not feel active participation should be optional. As found in previous studies (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012), teachers indicated they wanted choice in determining the path a PLC should take; however, they also indicated that pursuing a path should not be an option. It must be noted that by the very fact these teachers were participating in the study, they already exhibited a certain degree of compliance. They even referred to themselves as rule followers.

Teachers did consider the administration responsible for identifying teachers’ needs. These needs were represented as both identifying academic strengths and acknowledging different teacher temperaments. Teachers wanted their administrators to focus on academic strengths of individual teachers. For example, it was suggested princi-
pals better utilize the knowledge and competencies of their teachers when requesting tasks be accomplished.

With the exception of one teacher, all teachers acknowledged that if a PLC were not effective due to personality conflicts between members of the group, the administrator should realign the members of the group to better meet the personality needs. The one dissenting teacher posed that teachers are adult professionals and should set aside petty differences to function as a group of professionals. The dissenting participant’s comments supported Lieberman and Miller’s (2008) findings which indicated that positive interactions among teachers result from “challenging disagreement and… accepting responsibility without assigning blame” (p. 18). Other research also dictated the importance of honest discourse among PLC members. While honest discourse may at first be uncomfortable, it is necessary to enhance the learning experience and progress the PLC to a stage of true collaboration (Dooner et al., 2008).

While administrators discussed groups that did not function, they did not see it as their responsibility to change the makeup of the group. Administrators perceived that it would be beneficial for the group members to work together and learn from one another’s differences instead of only working with colleagues who did not question the status quo. The administrators’ perceptions were supported by Achinstein (2002) who asserted that in order to grow professionally, teachers need to collaborate with other teachers who may not share the same ideas and teaching philosophy.

Another subtheme relevant only to the teacher case study was teachers’ desire to have observation time to visit other classrooms as a way to improve practice. Teachers perceived providing time for observation was a responsibility of the administration.
Teachers also believed that it would be benefit them as learners. Teachers denoted observation as a method that changed classroom practice. Teachers cited examples of inadvertently seeing a lesson in another classroom and then implementing that lesson in their own class. Previous studies explored effective techniques of professional learning. Guskey (2003) did not find observation of teachers supported professional learning. However, there are studies that advocate for the importance of teachers observing other teachers as a means of changing teaching practices (Carey & Frechtling, 1997; Cohen, 1990; Garet et al., 2001; Penuel et al., 2007). Observation of other teachers was found to be a way of improving teaching practice because it provided reassurance from colleagues (Barth, 1991; Meister, 2010; Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005).

**Collaboration**

Collaboration was another theme identified by cross case-analysis. The findings indicated that all three groups of educators believed collaboration with colleagues was an important tenet in professional learning. District leaders, administrators, and teachers all presented examples of when they had been involved in collaboration with peers that had resulted in professional learning. All groups offered examples of when they had witnessed collaboration among other adults that resulted in professional learning. Personal experiences bolstered their desire to continue seeking time to collaborate with colleagues. These findings support other research findings which suggest collaboration among colleagues creates an environment that promotes professional learning among adults (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Knapp, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wei et al., 2009).
Interestingly, collaboration held multiple meanings among the three cases. Administrators discussed their role in providing time for their teachers to meet in PLCs as an essential step in the process of teacher collaboration. Administrators explained PLCs in terms of procedures and tasks. To administrators, it was a matter of ensuring job-embedded time in order to satisfy a definition of PLC. That definition among the schools was also different. Some high schools called department meetings PLCs; some called grade level meetings as a PLC and one school even called a faculty meeting a PLC. These multiple definitions of PLC demonstrate that the term is often used interchangeably without true thought to its definition (DuFour et al., 2009). Although managed differently, all high schools in Sunshine School District had provided job-embedded time for collaboration with PLCs. Administrators proudly shared their school’s schedule and explained how the schedule allowed time for teachers to collaborate in their PLCs. The administrators’ perceived focus on providing necessary time reinforced important concepts of a functioning PLC.

District leaders also commented on providing time for teachers to meet in PLCs. District leaders indicated the beginning of a new late start district policy would allow teachers more time to collaborate with one another and to look at the four critical questions on which the district bases its definition of a PLC. District leaders perceived PLCs as a means of changing classroom practice because they had continued to work toward full implementation of the PLC model meeting the criteria required for effective PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2004; DuFour et al., 2005; Eaker et al., 2002). Throughout the six-year process, they had continued because their beliefs aligned with
what others indicated about PLCs. The process takes time, patience and determination (DuFour et al., 2008).

The teacher case indicated a strong desire to collaborate with their colleagues. Again, the definition of collaboration was different. Although all teachers specified the significance of collaboration in the learning process, none of the teachers discussed the PLC experience as a form of collaboration. According to the teachers, the best form of collaboration occurred in the hallways and in impromptu discussions teachers had with one another between classes or after school. Teachers cited examples of how teaching practices had changed because of conversations with other teachers. Since “adults are themselves the richest resources for one another” (Knowles & Associates, 1984, p. 10), teachers sought these conversations because teachers wanted to gain knowledge about a particular area. This further supports this study’s theoretical framework of adult learning. With regards to readiness to learn (Knowles & Associates, 1984), the teachers displayed a readiness to enhance their own knowledge when they chose to collaborate with their colleagues about changing classroom practices.

Teachers’ readiness to learn was coupled with another precept of andragogy, orientation for learning (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Based on teacher experiences, teachers knew that immediate information could be gained from having conversations with other teachers. The immediacy of the feedback was a key factor because it provided teachers the opportunity to return to the classroom and change a lesson or activity. According to Putnam and Borko (2000), collaboration is not limited to a particular context. It is situated in learning for the teachers.
Attitude

All three cases identified the significance of teachers’ attitude on growth and development. Each group believed teachers needed to approach professional learning with the desire to improve classroom instruction. The beliefs of the three groups aligned with one definition of professional learning that suggests a participant learns when the desire to learn exists (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). All three cases also indicated that there was little to be done with the teacher who refused to have a positive attitude. The participants recognized there would always be naysayers among a group and that the best hope was the naysayers would experience a change in attitude based on positive attitudes and interactions with others.

Two cases, district leaders and administrators showed the importance of the school leaders’ attitude. District leaders and administrators believed that the school leader must approach the PLC process with a positive outlook and present the idea to the faculty as a researched based approach. District leaders and administrators also believed this would be beneficial to the success of the PLCs.

Authentic Learning

Each case provided evidence that study participants believed that authentic learning meant something changed in classroom practice. This aligns with the definition of professional learning adopted in this study: professional learning enacts a change in classroom practice (Wei et al., 2009). However, only two cases indicated authentic learning took place as a result of participation in a PLC. District leaders and high school administrators saw the PLC process as a method to improve teaching in the classrooms, thus sup-
porting current findings of PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2004; Eaker et al., 2002).

However, teachers did not agree with school leaders. Teachers found the process of PLC participation to be rigid and task oriented. Focus group participants felt the PLC structure was not beneficial to them as learners and that it actually prohibited their collaboration with their colleagues because teachers were forced to cover information at certain times that may or may not have anything to do with what teachers needed from their colleagues. These findings supported studies by Wells and Feun (2008) which indicated high school teachers collaborated with one another but true collaboration declined during a formal PLC time and their dialogue became “superficial with regards to core principles of PLCs” (p. 47). A difference between the two studies is that Wells and Feun looked at the implementation process of PLCs over time and cited reasons such as time during the day and a sustained effort on the school’s part for possible reasons for their results. Wells and Feun’s findings were not supported by the current study. Sunshine district implemented PLCs three years longer than the schools studied by Wells and Feun and also provided time during the day for PLCs to meet.

Conclusions

Sunshine School District’s implementation of PLCs as a form of professional development has continued to be a focus for the district. A concerted effort to provide time and resources for teachers to participate in job-embedded PLCs has been a priority. Each school has developed a plan for allowing teachers to meet within their PLCs during
school time. Leaders continue to structure their professional development model based on core principles supporting PLCs.

It was clear the district supported the PLC process. The district leaders discussed the implementation of a late start as one to provide time for teachers to collaborate. Equally clear was the commitment the administrators had to the PLC concept. Administrators followed the precepts and guidelines established by the district and created learning teams within their schools. Administrators genuinely believed that if teachers put forth the needed effort and a positive attitude they would learn something in the process. What lacked clarity was how to change attitudes to impact PLCs. Only one of the administrators recognized growth in his PLCs. He had moved from having at one point an agenda for his teachers to follow to understanding his teachers could participate on their own.

School administrators continued to focus professional learning opportunities towards a PLC format. Administrators too were committed and convinced the PLC model was beneficial. Administrators offered structure to the PLCs, not seeking input from their teachers. Administrators used agendas and notes for accountability and although administrators agreed some PLCs were unproductive, administrators have continued to utilize the method because based on their personal experiences, they articulated the overall impact of the PLC process works.

However, a disconnect existed between what school administrators and district leaders perceived and what high school teachers perceived. The high school teachers perceived the PLCs to be ineffective in terms of providing professional growth. Multiple reasons were cited for this: lack of autonomy, rigidity, difficulty in working with some
colleagues. Although other studies suggest effective PLCs implementation is a process, no clear time frame was determined other than the process must take more than 3 years (Capers, 2004; Wells & Feunn, 2008). This study looked at a district in which the process occurred over a 6-year period and the results were similar to other findings.

Because teachers did not perceive PLCs to be contributing to teacher learning, the question becomes why. If we look at the precepts of adult learning as described by Knowles and Associates (1984) as compared to what high school teachers viewed as happening in the PLC process, we might have a plausible answer.

**Regarding the Need to Know**

Adults will more likely take part in a learning experience if they know why it is important (Knowles, 1990). Knowles (1990) concluded that adult learners will better engage in the learning process if adults know prior to meeting the reason behind the information being presented. Teachers did not indicate they accepted the need for PLCs. The main principle surrounding andragogy, the idea that learners “need to know” (Knowles, 1990, p. 10), has been united with the idea that adult learners should be involved in a “collaborative planning process for their learning” (Knowles et al., p. 181). This was present in the teachers’ beliefs about collaboration as teachers perceived better collaboration and learning experiences took place during informal conversations between teachers.

**Regarding the Concept of the Learner**

Adult learners are self-directed learners who competently complete tasks without requiring direction or monitoring from others (Steinke, 2012). The PLC model promoted
by Sunshine School District did not promote this kind of learning environment. The structure provided by the administrators did little to promote autonomy and self-direction because teachers were told what to discuss. The teachers were given tasks to accomplish during each PLC meeting. Thus, the teachers perceived they were treated like students.

**Regarding the Role of the Learner’s Experience**

Teachers enter a PLC discussion with experiences of their own. According to Knowles (1990), the experiences of the adult learner enhance the learning experience. Knowles acknowledged that because of the experiences adults bring to any learning situation, the possibility arises that the adult learners will have preconceived ideas and beliefs that might negatively impact the new learning that should occur. This precept relates to the theme of attitude in that teacher attitude is somewhat based on previous experiences teachers may have had both as a participant in a PLC and as a continual learner.

**Regarding Readiness to Learn**

Adults learn when they are ready to learn and when adults see a need to learn something in order to benefit them as adults (Knowles & Associates, 1984). All groups acknowledged the desire to learn must be present. The district leaders and administrators indicated teachers must desire to learn while participating in a PLC. The teachers did not share the same belief. The structure of the PLC was not conducive to the teachers’ desire because the structure prevented choice and autonomy.
Regarding Orientations to Learning

Knowles and Associates (1984) explained that since adults learn when they know they will benefit from the learning experience, it is important to recognize that learning by adults is not done for the mere “sake of learning” (p. 12). Learning occurs when adults realize that life will be easier and better due to the learning experience. Therefore, the learning experience must be pertinent to the adult from the beginning. Although the PLC process was implemented by the district and the high school administrators appeared to understand the significance of PLCs, there was no indication teachers had participated in the decision process to begin using PLCs as a method of professional development. The mandate to implement PLCs came from the district leaders. Therefore, teachers did not indicate the PLC experience as pertinent. Teachers saw it as prohibitive to learning; however, teachers recognized the importance of learning from their peers in informal situations.

Regarding Motivation to Learn

Adults are motivated to learn based on intrinsic characteristics such as self-esteem, gaining self-confidence, recognition from others and self-actualization (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). There was no evidence to suggest the current practice of PLCs offered any positive reinforcement for the teachers. Teachers indicated that teachers desired to be noticed by administrators for good things happening in classrooms, but teachers felt as if they seldom received this kind of recognition.
Implications for Current Practice

The findings from this research have practical implications for both district leaders and school leaders who want to develop professional development activities that promote professional learning among their teachers. All groups agreed that evidence of authentic learning took place when a change in practice occurred. Findings from this study suggest that learning for high school teachers does not take place in a structured PLC format as it was done in Sunshine high schools. The forced collaboration coupled with the lack of autonomy given by the administrators did not promote the characteristics needed for adult learning to occur. Therefore, allowing teachers a choice in how PLCs are structured might better promote authentic learning and changes in classroom practice.

Teachers indicated they want a choice in what is discussed during their PLC time. Agendas provided by the administration did little to improve the function of the PLC.

A study conducted by Sturko and Gregson (2009) looked at collaboration among career technical teachers and core subject area teachers. They offered a choice for teachers: teachers could either participate in a structured PLC format or participate in a PLC format that was self-directed by its members. Sturko and Gregson found that both methods of collaboration produced a change in teacher practices. Taking into account the administrators’ need for structure and the teachers’ desire for choice, a viable option would be to offer both formats. In so doing, a format could be constructed that allowed the administrators to step in and offer structure if it were needed and it would also allow teachers autonomy to focus on a topic of their choice.

Mindich and Lieberman (2012) studied PLC participation at two middle schools and found a similar approach proved to create enthusiasm among some participating
teachers. Principals reported a new interest among teachers in learning and collaborating. However, they also reported that other participants desired a more structured approach because they were not certain of what was expected. One format will not meet the needs of all teachers. Offering a choice in formats will meet the needs of more.

A study conducted by Doolittle et al. (2008) looked at how creating professional development schools could benefit PLCs. Their study indicated that effective PLCs result from effective schools focusing on creating relationships between K-12 schools and local universities. With such a relationship comes added knowledge and a sense of community that provides an authentic learning environment. An implication for practice would be for school districts and leaders to begin building such relationships in order to benefit from expertise offered from university staff.

Another implication for practice is to allow teachers time to observe other teachers they choose to observe. Giving teachers time and choice for observations encourages teachers to become self-directed learners. According to Merriam (2008), self-directed learning provides input into what information is obtained and when that information is obtained. By allowing teachers to observe other educators of their choice, administrators would promote self-directed learning among their teachers. Autonomy of the learning situation is the most important aspect of self-directed learning for most adults (Knowles et al., 2011).

Although not indicative of the PLC structure in Sunshine Schools, PLC practices often involve observing one another’s classes (Wei et al., 2009). Teachers in this study indicated they changed practices in the classroom when they had seen what other teachers who taught the same subject had done. The examples given were not scheduled observa-
tions; they were examples of teachers who by happenstance saw something in another teacher’s classroom. District leaders and school leaders could change learning for their teachers by placing an emphasis on peer observation and allowing teachers the choice to participate. Active learning opportunities, such as peer observations, transform teaching (Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005). A study by Little (1990) found that peer observations supported teachers’ drive for learning and improved instructional practice.

A final implication for practice is for district leaders and high school administrators to train teachers how to work within group settings. Collaborative learning engages adults to seek new knowledge and to add to current knowledge (Kasl & Yorks, 2010). Forming cooperative learning groups requires the participants have an understanding of how to collaborate with one another (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). A study conducted by Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) showed how PLCs slowly began to function as a team with the correct guidance. Over time, history and English teachers in an urban high school created a group based on established norms as they learned to utilize the differences among group members.

However, developing relationships among groups of adults requires commitment from leadership and from teachers. Leaders who are willing to invest in the process will benefit from the results. Grossman et al. (2001) provide a model for developing a mature learning community. According to their findings, it is important to focus on four areas. (1) creating an identity and establishing norms, (2) working through communication barriers, (3) accepting that there will be tension, and (4) holding one another accountable. When these steps are nurtured by both leaders and teachers, they can be a means of teacher learning (Grossman et al., 2001).
Implications for Future Research

Findings from this research imply a need for future research by those interested in the impact of PLCs on student learning and teacher learning.

1) My study found that teachers who participated perceived that how PLCs were structured and operated in Sunshine School District was not conducive to their own professional learning. Future research could look at middle school and elementary teachers in Sunshine School District to determine if those teachers hold the same perceptions about learning during PLC participation or if the perceptions were strictly held by high school teachers. This would help to determine if high school teachers are isolated in their beliefs or if there is a true disconnect between what is presented as a model structure for a PLC and what is actually occurring in Sunshine School District.

2) This study identified four themes associated with perceptions held by three levels of educators who had all been employed by the district for at least six years for district leaders and teachers and at least four years for high school administrators. Future research could look at educators’ perceptions regardless of the number of years employed by a system to determine if the same themes exist or if number of years’ experience plays a role in determining professional learning during the PLC process.

3) Another direction for further research would be to expand this study to include other high school teachers. This qualitative study focused on one system that had developed a strategic continuous improvement plan involving PLCs as a model for professional learning. The study could be expanded to include indi-
individual interviews and observations of high school teachers participating in
PLCs across multiple districts.

**Overall Significance of the Study**

This qualitative multiple case study offered insight into adult learning that occurs
during a PLC at the high school level. Previous research findings dictate that effective
professional development occurs when there is a focus on the professional learner (Garet
et al., 2001; Hirsh & Hord, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). Other research has indicated
the use of PLCs has provided a model of professional learning that promotes student
achievement (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker et al., 2002;
McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). However, prior research has not focused on whether the
model of PLCs support the adult learner. My study helped to fill a gap in the literature by
looking at perceptions of adults mandating the PLCs and adults participating in the PLCs.
My study was significant because it looked at a school system that had already engaged
in a sustained process of developing effective PLCs as outlined by leading researchers in
the field (DuFour et al., 2009; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al.,
2008). By looking at three levels of educators within the same system, my study offered
another perspective not found in other studies. Successful learning communities have
been documented by researchers like Little (1990), Little and Houston (2003), McLaugh-
lin and Talbert (2006) and Mindich and Lieberman (2012). However, many schools con-
tinue to struggle with implementing such effective communities (Tarnoczi, 2006).

A final significant aspect of my study is that it specifically looked at how PLCs
supported adult learning theories. By exploring the PLC model as a means of offering ef-
fective professional learning for teachers, my research helped to fill a gap and offered a pathway to future research about effective ways for school leaders to provide effective models of professional learning activities to teachers.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

GATEKEEPER CONSENT LETTER
April 29, 2013

Superintendent
__________ School District

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear ________________________

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study within your school district. I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at The University of Alabama in Birmingham and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled Perceptions of District Leaders, School Administrators, and Teachers Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model to Support Adult Learning

I hope to interview four district leaders, five high school administrators, and three focus groups of high school teachers. Due to the nature of the study, I hope to recruit educators who have been a part of Professional Learning Communities in Shelby County since the inception of this professional development focus.

If approval is granted, I will interview individual participants from the district level in their respective offices at a time that is convenient for them. The interviews will last 50 minutes. The participating high school administrators will be interviewed at their school sites for 50 minutes at a time convenient to their schedule. The focus groups will be conducted after school for 60 minutes and held at Shelby County Instructional Services Center. No costs will be incurred by either your school district or the individual participants.

If you agree, please submit a signed letter of permission on your school district’s letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at your institution.

Sincerely,

Kristi Sayers, UAB doctoral student

cc: Dr. L. Collins, UAB Committee Co-Chair
    Dr. D. K. Gurley, UAB Committee Co-Chair
APPENDIX B

DISTRICT LEADER RECRUITMENT EMAIL LETTER
Dear District Leader,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at The University of Alabama in Birmingham. I am asking you to take part in a research study that I will be conducting. The research study titled *Perceptions of District Leaders, Administrators, and Teachers Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model to Support Adult Learning* will look at the perceptions that educators at three different levels have about adult learning that may occur while participating in a professional learning community. The research will involve interviewing district leaders about their experience with professional learning communities and how that experience may be translated into teacher learning. The study will hopefully help district leaders and school leaders structure their professional development and their professional learning communities in a manner that best meets the needs of their teachers.

I am asking you to participate in the study because you have been a district leader in a school district that has been implementing professional learning communities since 2007. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to set aside 50 minutes for an interview to occur at your central office location. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your thoughts on professional learning communities in your district. I will ask that you allow me to audiotape the interviews and they will be transcribed verbatim. The transcripts will be sent to you for clarification purposes to make sure that I recorded the information correctly and that the recorded information captured your ideas and beliefs.

While this study has no foreseeable risks, I would like to disclose some information up front. Although your responses will not be identified by name, the responses may be identified as having come from a district leader. Your participation in the study provides the risk that you may be identified as having the same beliefs as the overall group, which in fact this may not be the case. Whether or not you take part in this study is your choice. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to be in the study. Participating in this study will have no effect on your employment. There is no cost to you for agreeing to participate in this study. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with me or with your school district. You will receive a $10 gift card for participating in the study as a gesture of appreciation for your time. The gift card will be mailed to your school after the interview is complete.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please respond to this email and I will call you to schedule a time for us to meet. If you have any questions, you may contact me, the principal investigator at 205-835-3930 or ksayers@sheehyed.k12.al.us. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the UAB Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 944-3789 or toll free at 1-855-860-3789.

Sincerely,

Kristi Sayers
APPENDIX C

HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR RECRUITMENT EMAIL LETTER
Dear Administrator,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at The University of Alabama in Birmingham. I am asking you to take part in a research study that I will be conducting. The research study titled “Perceptions of District Leaders, Administrators, and Teachers Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model to Support Adult Learning” will look at the perceptions that educators at three different levels have about adult learning that may occur while participating in a professional learning community. The research will involve interviewing high school administrators about their experience with professional learning communities and how that experience may be translated into teacher learning. The study will hopefully help district leaders and school leaders structure their professional development and their professional learning communities in a manner that best meets the needs of their teachers.

I am asking you to participate in the study because you have been an administrator since at least 2010 in a school district that has been implementing professional learning communities since 2007. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to set aside 50 minutes for an interview to occur at your school. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your thoughts concerning professional learning communities in your school. I will ask that you allow me to audio-tape the interviews and they will be transcribed verbatim. The transcripts will be submitted to you for clarification purposes to make sure that I recorded the information correctly and that the recorded information captured your ideas and beliefs.

While this study has no unforeseen risks, I would like to disclose some information up front. Although your responses will not be identified by name, the responses may be identified as having come from a high school administrator. Your participation in the study provides the risk that you may be identified as having the same beliefs as the overall group, when in fact this may not be the case. Whether or not you take part in this study is your choice. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to be in the study. Participating in this study will have no effect on your employment. There is no cost to you for agreeing to participate in this study. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with me or with your school district. You will receive a $10 gift card for participating in the study as a gesture of appreciation for your time. The gift card will be mailed to your school after the interview is complete.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please respond to this email and I will call you to schedule a time for us to meet. If you have any questions, you may contact me, the principal investigator at 205-855-3930 or jsayers@shehvved.k12.al.us. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the UAB Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or toll free at 1-855-860-3789.

Sincerely,

Kristi Sayers
APPENDIX D

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Teacher,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at The University of Alabama in Birmingham. I am asking you to take part in a research study that I will be conducting. The research study titled Perceptions of District Leaders, Administrators, and Teachers Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model to Support Adult Learning will look at the perceptions that educators at three different levels have about adult learning that may occur while participating in a professional learning community. The research will involve interviewing teachers about their experience with professional learning communities and how that experience may be translated into teacher learning. The study will hopefully help district leaders and school leaders structure their professional development and their professional learning communities in a manner that best meets the needs of their teachers.

I am asking you to participate in the study because you have been a teacher in a school district that has been implementing professional learning communities since 2007. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to set aside 60 minutes to be a part of a focus group of teachers who also have been employed by the same system since 2007. Focus groups will consist of 8 to 10 teachers and will meet at the system’s Instructional Center. During the focus group interview, I will facilitate a discussion about your thoughts concerning professional learning communities in your school. I will ask that you allow me to audiotape the focus group interviews and they will be transcribed verbatim from the audiotape.

While this study has no foreseen risks, I would like to disclose some information up front. Although your responses will not be identified by name, the responses may be identified as having come from a teacher. Your participation in the study provides the risk that you may be identified as having the same beliefs as the overall group, when in fact this may not be the case. Whether or not you take part in this study is your choice. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to be in the study. Participating in this study will have no effect on your employment. There is no cost to you for agreeing to participate in this study. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with me or with your school district. You will receive a $10 gift card for participating in the study as a gesture of appreciation for your time. The gift card will be mailed to your school after the focus group interview is complete.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please respond to this email and I will call you with one of three dates for focus group meetings. If you have any questions, you may contact me, the principal investigator at 205-835-3930 or ksavers@sheboygan.k12.wi.us. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the UAB Office of the IRB (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or toll free at 1-855-869-3789.

Sincerely,

Kristi Sayers
APPENDIX E

DISTRICT LEADER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol: A multiple-case study about perceptions of district leaders, school administrators, and teachers regarding the professional learning community model to support adult learning

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Kristi T. Sayers

Interviewee: ______________________________

Position of Interviewee:

Introduction:

( Participant name), I want to thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to talk to me today. Everything that we say today will be on the record unless you specifically request otherwise during our interview. As stated in the recruitment letter, I am conducting a multiple-case research study for partial fulfillment of my doctoral program at UAB. The purpose of this multi-case study is to explore what district leaders, school administrators, and teachers in an award winning school district in Alabama think about participating in PLCs as a form of professional learning for teachers. Please remember that I will be audiotaping our conversation as well as taking notes during our discussion. Audiotapes will be transcribed in their entirety for review by me and you. At the conclusion of this interview, I will ask you for a pseudonym that you would like me to use so that your anonymity will be protected.

Questions:

Icebreaker #1: Tell me why you became an educator?

Icebreaker #2: Tell me why you are still an educator?
1. What are your thoughts about professional development activities?

2. What is the role of the district leaders in providing professional development for teachers?

3. What is the role of the principals in providing professional development for teachers?

4. What is the role of teachers in seeking professional development for themselves?

5. What would you say is the difference between professional development and professional learning?

6. What is the most effective professional development activity you have ever participated in?

7. What made that activity better than the others?

8. How do you know when you have really learned something?

9. How does participating in a PLC impact classroom teaching?
10. What is the best thing about the PLC process?

11. Talk to me about the challenges that might be involved with the PLC process?

12. Tell me what continuous teacher learning means to you?

13. How would you describe your role as a continuous learner to other people?

14. How would you describe the learning that occurs during a PLC?

15. If you could change one thing about teachers working in a PLC, what would it be? Why?
APPENDIX F

HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol: A multiple-case study about perceptions of district leaders, school administrators, and teachers regarding the professional learning community model to support adult learning

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Kristi T. Sayers

Interviewee: __________________________

Position of Interviewee:

Introduction:

( Participant name), I want to thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to talk to me today. Everything that we say today will be on the record unless you specifically request otherwise during our interview. As stated in the recruitment letter, I am conducting a multiple-case research study for partial fulfillment of my doctoral program at UAB. The purpose of this multi-case study is to explore what district leaders, school administrators, and teachers in an award-winning school district in Alabama think about participating in PLCs as a form of professional learning for teachers. Please remember that I will be audiotaping our conversation as well as taking notes during our discussion. Audiotapes will be transcribed in their entirety for review by me and you. At the conclusion of this interview, I will ask you for a pseudonym that you would like me to use so that your anonymity will be protected.

Questions:

Icebreaker #1: Tell me why you became an educator?

Icebreaker #2: Tell me why you are still an educator?
1. What are your thoughts about professional development activities?

2. What is the role of the district leaders in providing professional development for teachers?

3. What is the role of the principals in providing professional development for teachers?

4. What is the role of teachers in seeking professional development for themselves?

5. What would you say is the difference between professional development and professional learning?

6. What is the most effective professional development activity you have ever participated in?

7. What made that activity better than the others?

8. How do you know when you have really learned something?

9. How does participating in a PLC impact classroom teaching?
10. What is the best thing about the PLC process?

11. Talk to me about the challenges that might be involved with the PLC process?

12. Tell me what continuous teacher learning means to you?

13. How would you describe your role as a continuous learner to other people?

14. How would you describe the learning that occurs during a PLC?

15. If you could change one thing about teachers working in a PLC, what would it be? Why?
Focus Group Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: A multiple-case study about perceptions of district leaders, school administrators, and teachers regarding the professional learning community model to support adult learning

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:

Interviewer: Kristi T. Sayers

Introduction:

I want to thank you all for taking time from your busy schedule to talk to me today. Everything that we say today will be on the record unless you specifically request otherwise during our interview. As stated in the recruitment letter, I am conducting a multiple-case research study for partial fulfillment of my doctoral program at UAB. The purpose of this multi-case study is to explore what district leaders, school administrators, and teachers in an award winning school district in Alabama think about participating in PLCs as a form of professional learning for teachers. Please remember that I will be audiotaping our conversation as well as taking notes during our discussion. I have some guiding questions but I am really interested in your questions and comments so let’s have a dialogue. Audiotapes will be transcribed in their entirety for review by me. I will send you each a copy of the transcript for you to review also. At the conclusion of this interview, I will ask you for a pseudonym that you would like me to use so that your anonymity will be protected.

What are your thoughts about professional development activities?

What is the role of the district leaders in providing professional development for teachers?

What is the role of the principals in providing professional development for teachers?

What is the role of teachers in seeking professional development for themselves?

What would you say is the difference between professional development and professional learning?
What is the most effective professional development activity you have ever participated in?

What made that activity better than the others?

How do you know when you have really learned something?

How does participating in a PLC impact classroom teaching?

What is the best thing about the PLC process?

Talk to me about the challenges that might be involved with the PLC process?

Tell me what continuous teacher learning means to you?

How would you describe you role as a continuous learner to other people?

How would you describe the learning that occurs during a PLC?

If you could change one thing about teachers working in a PLC, what would it be? Why?
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APPENDIX H

AUDIT TRAIL
A key method in establishing credibility for qualitative findings is the use of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Utilizing an audit trail allowed me to document my study from its inception to its completion.

- Research proposal: I developed and submitted my proposal to my research committee and to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). My proposal included the purpose of my study, data collection procedures and research questions. I received approval for my study in the spring of 2013.

- Literature review: I conducted an in-depth review of the literature surrounding adult learning theories, characteristics of effective professional development for educators, and the use of professional learning communities in the educational setting.

- Site selection requirements: One large school district was chosen for participant selection. The selected school district had implemented and supported a continuous improvement plan which included the use of professional learning communities as its main model for professional development for its teachers.

- Participant selection requirements: Participants must have been employed by the school system for a certain number of years to qualify for the study. District leaders and high school teachers must have been employed with the system since the inception of the professional learning community model which was mandated in 2007. High school administrators must have been employed as a high school administrator within the system since 2009.
• Participant recruitment: I sent recruitment emails sent to all district leaders, high school administrators and high school teachers meeting the required criteria. Participants responded via email if they agreed to participate in the study. Correspondence continued via email to schedule individual interviews and focus group interviews.

• Individual interview process: I interviewed the district leaders and high school administrators before conducting focus group interviews. I met three district leaders in their offices and one district leader came to my office. All interviews of high school administrators took place in the office of the administrator. I interviewed a total of four district leaders and five high school administrators. I first interviewed three district leaders and then all five administrators. The fourth district leader was the last individual interview conducted.

• Focus interview process: After I conducted all individual interviews, I facilitated three focus group interviews. Each focus group interview occurred at the system’s instructional service center. Teachers were familiar with the setting as it is a central location for professional development training. Eight teachers participated in two of the focus groups and nine teachers participated in one of the focus groups. A total of 25 teachers participated.

• Member checking: After each interview, both individual and focus group, I sent a typed copy of the interview transcript via email to the participants. I asked them to read the transcript to determine if I had captured their
words and ideas adequately. No participants indicated any changes needed to be made; therefore, no changes were made to the data collected.

- **Data analysis:** I continually analyzed the data throughout the collection process. I utilized a “lean coding” process (Creswell, 2013, p. 184) for individual cases and for the cross-case analysis. I utilized NVivo 10 software to manage and organize my data as my categories expanded.

- **Data collection completed:** Based on my analysis, it was determined that saturation had occurred for each individual case because participants offered similar answers to the questions.

- **Themes and subthemes:** I identified themes and subthemes for each case that captured the participants’ answers to the interview questions. I used thick rich description of the participants’ responses to validate the themes and subthemes.

- **Cross-case analysis:** I completed a cross-case analysis among all three cases to explore similarities and differences.
APPENDIX I

IRB APPROVAL
UAB's Institutional Review Board (IRB) has an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The assurance number is FWA0005969 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 46.

Principal Investigator: SAYERS, KRISTI T
Co-Investigator(s):
Protocol Number: E130510008
Protocol Title: Perceptions of District Leaders, School Administrators, and Teachers Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model to Support adult Learning

The above project was reviewed on 5/18/16. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This project qualifies as an exemption as defined in 45CFR46.101, paragraph ___.

This project received EXEMPT review.
IRB Approval Date: 5/18/16
Date IRB Approval Issued: 5/18/16

Cari Oliver
Assistant Director, Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:
IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

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