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Lessons From A Rural Georgia School on Developing Successful Professional Learning Communities

Roderick Donnel Sams

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LESSONS FROM A RURAL GEORGIA SCHOOL ON DEVELOPING
SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

by

RODERICK D. SAMS

(Under the Direction of Dr. Meta Harris)

ABSTRACT

The literature on educational leadership and school change recognizes clearly the influence of the principal on whether or not change will occur in the school. It seems clear that transforming the school organization into a professional learning community can be done only with the sanction of the principal and active nurturing of the professional development of the staff in order to progress as a learning community. Thus, a look at the elementary principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how they operate effectively. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities.

In order to explain the role of elementary principals from the Participant's point of view, a self-ethnographic, qualitative methodology is used in this study. A semi-structured interview was conducted, due to the Participant's experience, knowledge of the school, and role in the development of professional learning communities. Because of the proximity of the Participant, a face to face interview was conducted.

Findings of the study, though similar to some of the literature on developing professional learning communities, contributed to the research. Identified themes gained from the study that determine the role of elementary principals in the development of

professional learning communities are the following: supportive leadership and shared decision making among stakeholders, shared values and a vision all can understand and embrace, structural conditions and supportive culture conducive to effective collaboration, and improved communication and professional development.

INDEX WORDS: Principals, Professional Learning Communities

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SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the man that was the father I did not have as a young child, my grandfather Robert Evans. Even though he never got much of a formal education, my grandfather was a wise man who was the true patriarch of our family. I learned more from him than any other man in my life. I am sure that if my grandfather were here with me today, he would tell me to always “get up and try it again”, no matter what the situation.

My grandfather did not live long enough to see me graduate with my undergraduate degree. Even though I was his first grandchild to graduate from college, I know my grandfather would have been pleased to see that day come. To make him proud of me was always a source of motivation to excel at the highest level. My grandfather has truly been an inspiration to me, and I would not be the man I am without him. Thank you “Sadie” for helping me become the man you knew I could be.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Study

Ten years ago, principals were asked to become instructional leaders, exercising firm control by setting goals, maintaining discipline, and evaluating results (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). Today principals are encouraged to be facilitative leaders by constructing teams, building systems, and leading from the middle (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). In the context of educational accountability, school leaders are encouraged to foster a sense of collaboration and cooperation among all stakeholders. To help all children become successful learners, schools are establishing learning communities in which student and teacher learning is continuous and supported (Bottery, 2003). Establishing vigorous learning communities requires a shift in our thinking about the traditional roles of educators and the nature of professional development. Beck and Murphy (1993) observed that the metaphors of school leadership have changed frequently over the years; no sooner have school leaders assimilated one recommended approach than they are seemingly urged to move in a different direction.

The role of principals in the development of professional learning communities makes this research very meaningful to current practitioners. The support of principals is critical in the effective implementation of learning communities (Marzano, 2003). Developing a professional learning community without the involvement of the principal makes the task more difficult (Marzano, 2003). Determining whether principals feel their role in the development of the professional learning communities is important makes for very interesting research. Therefore, the researcher's purpose is to explore the role of the

elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities at Blakeney Elementary School.

The Georgia Department of Education (2005) has determined that a standards-based curriculum is the most effective method of improving the instructional content for students. The Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) are being implemented in every school district in the state. GPS provide clear expectations for assessment, instruction, and student work (2005). The performance standards isolate and identify the skills needed to use the knowledge and skills to problem solve, reason, communicate, and make connections with other information. Performance standards also tell the teacher how to assess the extent to which the student knows the material or can manipulate and apply the information (2005). The Georgia Department of Education has also determined that professional learning communities will be established to provide meaningful professional development for all stakeholders throughout the GPS implementation (2005).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) occur when the professional staff learns together to direct their efforts toward improved student learning, conceptualized as five related dimensions that reflect the essence of a professional learning community: (1) shared and supported leadership; (2) shared vision and values; (3) collective learning application; (4) supportive conditions; and (5) shared personal practice (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Based on the research by Richard Dufour (2002), professional learning communities have been improving instructional methods in schools throughout the nation.

Principals no longer assume the exclusive responsibility for instructional leadership in schools where learning communities exist (Marzano, 2003). Instead,

teachers within the school take on new leadership roles (Jones, 1995). Professional development is no longer about individual improvement goals. Rather, the emphasis is placed on team building, where learning is more about what the team knows and can accomplish (Marzano, 2003). Study groups and vertical teams are organized around instructional practices and help teachers to diversify teaching strategies matched to the varied learning needs of students (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Conversations revolve around student work and progress.

The passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) places student performance and school and district accountability into center focus. Principals have developed professional learning communities in which student learning and professional development are ongoing and supported. Establishing professional learning communities requires an altering of our thinking regarding the conventional roles of educators and the nature of professional development.

A paradigm shift is needed, as professional learning communities are developed, both by stakeholders and by principals themselves, regarding the role of teachers. Stakeholders believe that the only legitimate use of instructional time is standing in front of the class, working directly with students. By becoming a professional learning community, teachers are being allowed use a greater portion of their time to plan, confer with colleagues, work with students individually, visit other classrooms, and engage in other professional development activities.

Statement of the Problem

Principals have often considered some professional development activities ineffective because outdated approaches have been used to introduce teachers to new

ideas without their input. These approaches often resulted in a lack of follow through or support in order to apply the innovation and new strategy. Prior to the implementation of learning communities, teachers seldom had the opportunity to create meaning and understanding about instructional strategy or practice for themselves, much less discuss with peers about the benefits of such a practice as it relates to student learning.

Professional learning communities involve all stakeholders in the school improvement process. Principals play an important role in facilitating professional development. Through strategic planning, reflective practice, and scheduling, principals help set the stage for successful practice. Finding out what the expectations are regarding how effective professional learning communities improve student achievement is valuable to principals. Most of the information regarding professional learning communities centers on the role of teachers. Therefore, the lack of research regarding the role of principals in the development of professional learning communities is evident.

The development of professional learning communities allows principals to transform their schools to achieve the highest levels of success (Blase & Blase, 2000). Principals are the instructional leaders of their schools, promoting collegiality and cooperation with all stakeholders (Marzano, 2003). Bringing about changes in perspective that will enable principals to understand and value professional learning communities will require focused and concerted effort for all (Dufour, 2002).

Professional learning communities represent a viable context in which shared decision making, collaboration of practice, and increased student learning are of the utmost importance (Hord, 1997). The role of principals in transforming a school to perform as a professional learning community is not clearly evident. Significant

adjustments are required for the purpose of improving instructional methods so that student academic achievement increases, which is the primary function of learning communities.

Principals hold high expectations for teachers by encouraging participation in decision-making teams and acquiring information necessary to make instructional decisions (Jones, 1995). Principals ask teachers to participate in grade-level and subject-area meetings, communicating with peers about teaching and learning decisions and practice (Marzano, 2003). Principals also expect teachers to become instructional leaders, with the responsibility of making the best possible decisions for students (Opalatka, 2004).

The importance of strong leadership within a school community is increasingly apparent with the development of PLCs (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). What is not clear is the role of principals in the development of professional learning communities. Little research has been done regarding how practicing principals actually promote the development of professional learning communities from an instructional perspective. Also, as professional learning communities are developed, it is also not clear whether the culture and structure of the school has any effect on the success of PLCs.

The idea that principals provide the instructional leadership necessary as an opportunity for change, determines whether active participation is a requirement for professional learning communities to flourish. Principals are afforded an opportunity to embrace the role of instructional leader by encouraging teachers to influence the instructional direction of the school significantly and accept the terms of such a challenge with foresight and determination. The instructional leadership in schools that have made

professional learning communities possible creates the cultural support and structure, the organizational framework of the school (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996), necessary in the development of instructional practices that improve learning opportunities for students. In this instance, school culture is the belief system that determines what occurs in schools and the rationale for the traits, attitudes, and behaviors of the faculty and staff (Barth, 1991).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study to educational leadership in the era of accountability is the fact that there is limited research regarding the role of principals in developing professional learning communities. Because professional learning communities provide more opportunities for participants to organize their professional development opportunities, understanding the role of the principal in the process creates a greater need for this study. Also, there is a need to determine whether principals use the structure and culture of their schools in developing professional learning communities in their particular schools.

This research is an attempt to provide data to principals that can help them understand their roles in the development and implementation of professional learning communities. In the current era of educational accountability, more is expected of principals to lead school improvement efforts. All schools are required to implement professional learning communities to assist in the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards (2005). PLCs are based on research by Dufour, Eaker, Marzano, and others that stress shared decision making and cooperation among all stakeholders.

The required implementation encourages Georgia's principals to embrace their role in facilitating a climate that allows for professional learning communities to be successful.

The structure and culture of schools have become more important to the implementation of scientifically research based school improvement efforts. Educational accountability has driven what is done and how it is done in schools, with the belief system that determines what occurs in schools and the rationale for the traits, attitudes, and behaviors of the faculty and staff became critical to school reform efforts. The school structure, the organizational framework of the school, should also be considered when developing initiatives designed to improve schools.

This study promotes an effort to encourage elementary principals to consider all aspects of their schools when implementing any school improvement process. The leadership of the principal is crucial to the success of any program instituted in the schools that they lead. In the education environment, professional learning communities have begun to gain more attention. The term 'communities' is being used to mean any number of things, such as: extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and principals simultaneously in learning. This researcher will use these examples to investigate the role of elementary principals in the implementation of professional learning communities.

Autobiographical Roots of the Study

My interest in professional learning communities and the role of elementary principals in that process is based on many factors and experiences that I have encountered throughout my life. As an elementary principal, I believe that leadership is

not just a characteristic; it is what I must demonstrate to be effective in my job. I do realize that I did not get to this point in my career without the influence of other leaders. The people I have been associated with and learned from truly have inspired me toward my current and future success. Many of those inspirations have come from my personal relationships with Blakeney Elementary.

Blakeney Elementary has had a varied and distinguished past. The school began in the early 1900s as Waynesboro High and Industrial School. In 1955, a new school complex was constructed, and the campus was divided into a high school and an elementary school. In 1966, the Waynesboro High and Industrial Schools were renamed Blakeney High and Blakeney Elementary, in honor of Mr. Robert E. Blakeney. Mr. Blakeney served as principal of Waynesboro High and Industrial School for thirty-one years. When Burke County Schools integrated in 1970, Blakeney High School was renamed Blakeney Junior High. Blakeney Elementary remained as a school from then until now.

My history with Blakeney Elementary did not begin with being named principal. My mother was a secretary at Blakeney Junior High School when I was a young boy. She would always tell me stories about the leadership of Mr. Blakeney. I soon realized the importance the school had to the community. The legacy of the leaders Blakeney Elementary has produced is one that causes me to think of these principals as larger than life figures. They helped transform a school system and community from one of segregation and separation to integration and cooperation. As principal, I understand what it means to continue the legacy these leaders began.

Several distinguished principals have served the school since the retirement of Mr. Blakeney. My predecessors established a legacy of leadership that I strive daily to emulate. Since becoming principal, I have looked to enhance the structure of the school and facilitate a continued cultural shift that will allow professional learning communities to flourish at Blakeney Elementary.

In 1989, I was hired as a paraprofessional at Blakeney Elementary. I never envisioned myself working with children. In fact, I was a History, Pre-Law major at the time. However, my Principal saw something in me. From the first day I entered that third grade classroom, I then knew teaching was what I was meant to do. I immediately changed my major to Early Childhood Education in order to pursue my new dream. I was going to become a teacher.

In 1993, I began my career as a fifth grade teacher at Blakeney. For the next four years, I learned many lessons about leadership that still remain with me today. In fact, I became grade level chairperson in just my second year, which had not happened previously. What made it so significant at the time was that grade level chairpersons were voted on by the members of each grade level. My peers seemed to believe in my abilities, and I took that as an affirmation that I had what it took to be a leader. I then enrolled in Augusta State University to pursue a Master's degree in Administration and Supervision, with the hope of becoming an administrator. Within two years, my dream became a reality, becoming an assistant principal at Burke County High School.

Becoming an assistant principal was a definite change in paradigm for me, becoming more school-focused than classroom focused. Also, to shift from elementary teacher to high school assistant principal was definitely a challenge to the leadership

capabilities my peers believed I possessed. I spent four years as an assistant principal at Burke County High School, the last being in a shared principalship with two of my peers. Maintaining my assistant principal's responsibilities while serving as one-third principal was a challenge and a struggle. However, the experience reassured me that I was going to be prepared fully for my first principalship at Sardis-Girard-Alexander Elementary (S.G.A.), which I began the following year.

In 2001, I began my reign as principal at SG.A. with adulatory acclaim and cautious apprehension. At age 31, I was one of the youngest principals in the state of Georgia and the youngest in Burke County since integration. But there were serious obstacles to scale as well. S.G.A. Elementary is identified as a Title I school, primarily because of the low socio-economic status of its students. Approximately 90% of S.G.A. students qualify for free or reduced price lunches based on benchmarks set by the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) Food and Nutrition Service. Through the Title I program, schools were required to meet certain academic achievement goals, even before the passage of *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. S.G.A. had not met those requirements for four consecutive years, placing the school in the category of needs improvement. The school was in need of intervention.

As principal, reform efforts were implemented through revamped school improvement planning and increased teacher autonomy. Stagnate, ineffective policies and procedures were replaced with scientifically research-based strategies for improving student achievement and school morale. After five years, S.G.A. Elementary has made adequate yearly progress (AYP) three consecutive years, achieving the academic benchmarks for school success established by NCLB with recognition as a Title I

Distinguished School. The time had come for a new challenge. That new challenge was being named principal at Blakeney Elementary. My professional career has now come full circle.

My experiences have helped to develop my confidence in professional learning communities as well. Before I understood what professional learning communities were, I possessed the skills that I believe define the term. I have held many positions that have required leadership skills. These positions are not reserved to my current profession of principal. I have been everything from captain of my basketball team in high school to Chairman of the Waynesboro-Burke County Recreation Commission. In each of these positions, I have led professional learning communities. Each role requires effective communication, shared decision-making, and collaborative planning, which are characteristics of professional learning communities (Dufour, 2002).

In developing professional learning communities, the factors previously mentioned create a climate for continuous improvement. Leaders must develop their own personal style in order to impact their organizations positively. Leaders must also be aware of the structure and culture of schools when developing a climate conducive to collaboration, which professional learning communities provides. Leadership is a process that should be shared among all members of an organization.

What I believe about effective professional learning communities is the combination of personal experiences, interaction with other leaders, and instruction on leadership theory. My belief in collaboration and cooperation allows me to effectively engage in positive concepts that empower stakeholders and encourage future success. Professional learning communities cannot address all the instructional and collegial

issues administrators will confront, but it will serve as a starting point for implementing school improvement that should be understood by the leaders as well as those being led.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is what is the role of the elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities?

Other questions to be answered by this study are:

- How do elementary principals use professional learning communities to facilitate school improvement?
- Do elementary principals use the structure and culture to develop the professional learning communities?
- What process did the elementary principals use to transform their schools into a professional learning community?

Preliminary Literature Review

The following paragraphs are an antecedent to a more comprehensive literature review, which will be presented in Chapter 2 of this study. Leadership styles and theory, school's structures and cultures, and the role of the principal in a professional learning community are discussed in this section. Establishing whether principals use structure and culture of their schools in developing professional learning communities will guide a review of research that effectively defines the role of principals as instructional leaders.

Leadership Styles and Theories

Developing professional learning communities in schools involves two broad leadership styles —transformational and transactional (King, 2002). The development offers the following guidelines for choosing leadership strategies: (1) leaders should use

strategies with flexibility; (2) leaders should balance short-term and long-term goals; (3) strategic alternatives must serve institutional standards; and (4) more than one strategy can serve the same act (King, 2002). The implementation of professional learning communities also has an important role in the improvement of schools. As leadership progresses toward effective decision-making and problem solving provided by professional learning communities, the strategies used to improve student achievement would become more apparent and successful (Jones, 1995).

Examining transformational leadership, which focuses on the significance of teamwork and comprehensive school improvement, is an important concept as an alternative to other models of leadership (Jung, 2001). Transformational leadership is contrasted with transactional leadership, which is based on an exchange of services for various kinds of rewards that the leader controls (Jung, 2001). Influenced by the development of leadership in the private sector, educational researchers have progressively focused more of their attention on transformational models of leadership that stress collaboration and empowerment (King, 2002). The goals of transformational leadership will permit school leaders to impact their educational environments positively (Barth, 1991).

Helping staff develop and maintain a collaborative, professional school culture is a critical component of transformational leadership (Jung, 2001). This means staff members often converse, observe, critique, and plan collaboratively (King, 2002). Standards of shared responsibility and continuous improvement encourage them to teach each other how to teach more effectively (Jung, 2001). Transformational leaders involve staff in collaborative goal setting, reduce teacher isolation, use bureaucratic methods to

support cultural changes, share leadership with others by delegating power, and actively communicate the norms and beliefs of schools (Northouse, 2004).

The motivation of teachers for development is enhanced when they internalize goals for professional growth (Jones, 1995). This process is facilitated when they are strongly committed to a school mission (Marzano, 2003). When leaders give staff a role in solving school improvement problems, they should make sure goals are explicit and ambitious but not unrealistic (Jones, 1995). Some value transformational leadership because it stimulates teachers to engage in new activities and put forth that extra effort (King, 2002). Transformational leaders use practices primarily to help staff members work smarter, not harder (Jung, 2001). These leaders shared a genuine belief that their staff members as a group could develop better solutions than the principal could alone (Jung, 2001).

The transactional leader's role is to foster the involvement of employees at all different levels (Conley & Goldman, 1994). Initially, the term transformational leadership was viewed as a personal quality, an ability to inspire employees to look beyond self-interest and focus on organizational goals. The concept has evolved over time; now it is often viewed as a broad strategy that has been described as transactional. Conley and Goldman (1994) also define transactional leadership as the behaviors that enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance. The key word here is collective; the transactional leader's role is to foster the involvement of all employees at all levels (Conley & Goldman, 1994).

Several key strategies are used by transactional leaders: overcoming resource constraints; building teams; providing feedback, coordination, and conflict management;

creating communication networks; practicing collaborative politics; and modeling the school's vision (Conley & Goldman, 1994). Influenced by leadership developments in the private sector, educational researchers have increasingly focused their attention on transformational models of leadership that emphasize collaboration and empowerment (Jung, 2001).

School Structure and Culture

Today, prevailing views of leadership suggest that the principal's role should not be to direct others but to create a school culture in which decisions are made collaboratively (Dufour, 2002). Such leadership exercises power 'through' others, not 'over' them (Conley & Goldman, 1994). The basic question is whether or not the two leadership styles previously mentioned are mutually exclusive.

Current definitions of instructional leadership are richer and more expansive than those of the past (King, 2002). Originally, the role involved traditional tasks such as setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, instructional leadership includes much deeper involvement in the core technology of teaching and learning. It carries more sophisticated views of professional learning, and emphasizes the use of data to make decisions (King, 2002). Attention has shifted from teaching to learning, and some now prefer the term learning leader to instructional leader (Dufour, 2002). Although instructional leadership is acknowledged to be a critical skill in educational administration, few principals and superintendents have had in-depth training for that role, especially in a standards-based environment (King, 2002).

Developing Professional Learning Communities

Schools that dedicate themselves to systematic, collaborative problem solving can continually develop and implement new ideas, becoming what is called learning organizations (Bottery, 2003). Creating a learning organization requires a deep rethinking of the leader's role (Bottery). Principals and superintendents who see themselves as learning leaders, take responsibility for helping schools develop the capacity to carry out their mission (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001). Learning becomes a collaborative, goal-oriented task rather than a generalized desire to stay current (Bottery, 2003).

In the education environment, professional learning communities have begun to gain more attention (Dufour, 2002). The term communities is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community, bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students, or engaging all stakeholders simultaneously in learning (Dufour, 2002).

Leaders are now beginning to view their organizations as professional learning communities, for faculty as well as students (Marzano, 2003). Establishing professional learning communities requires casting school improvement in terms of hypotheses to be tested rather than solutions to be handed out, attacking the barriers to collaboration, and making decisions democratically rather than bureaucratically (Dufour, 2002). When the spirit of inquiry permeates the daily routine, schools are on their way to becoming true learning organizations. Researchers have found that healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction (Bottery, 2003).

The development of PLCs depends upon the current elements of school communities, the effects of school community on staff members and students, the structural and organizational factors of community in schools, and the relationship of community to other improvement activities (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996).

A growing number of educators focus their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching. In place of the typical school's norms and practices that isolate teachers from one another, collaborative schools have norms that encourage teachers and principals to cooperate for school improvement (Sergiovanni, 1994). Such schools are characterized by frequent teacher interaction with respect to teaching methods and problems, frequent observation and constructive criticism of teachers, joint planning and preparation, and peer training and support (Jones, 1995).

The literature on school change and educational leadership, clearly recognize the role and influence of the school administrator on whether change will occur in the school (Blase & Blase, 2000; Dufour, 2002; King, 2002). It seems clear that transforming a school organization into a professional learning community can be done only with the endorsement of the leaders and the active nurturing of the entire staff's development as a community. Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how the principal accept a collegial relationship with teachers to share leadership, power, and decision making (Wilms, 2003).

The challenges facing school leaders today and the emphasis on increased accountability for student learning, foster the idea of a school where people are working together and creating desirable results (Bottery, 2003). The idea that teachers should be

learners for students to learn sounds simplistic but, in fact, this has often not been the norm in many schools (Dufour, 2002). Creating a professional learning community requires a new form of professional development. The professional learning not only affects the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individual teachers, administrators, and other school employees, but it also alters the structures and cultures of the organizations in which those individuals work (Barth, 1991). Through their participation in professional learning communities, teachers and principals became more effective, and student outcomes increased, which is a goal upon which everyone could agree (Dufour, 2002).

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design will be used to examine the role of a Georgia elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities. This methodology allows for an in-depth investigation into the role of principals in developing professional learning communities. Also, the research allows for a greater understanding of the relationship, if any, of using school culture and structure to develop professional learning communities, and the role of principals in the implementation process. The data will be obtained from interviews of participants by the researcher. The questions will be designed to determine the role of principals in developing professional learning communities. There will be two participants in this study. The participants will be asked to complete the demographic survey instrument, to provide information on the number of years of experience and length of service they have at their present school. Additional information to be gathered will include descriptions of the geographic area, the socioeconomic status of the students, and student achievement data of the school.

Key demographic information is ascertained to create portraiture of Blakeney Elementary. Descriptions of the geographic area and the students will include socio-economic status, ethnicity, and location (urban, rural, or suburban). Relative to NCLB, the educational status of each school will be discussed as well. Information such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status or any school wide academic awards will be used to provide more detailed information about the school.

Participant Selection and Profiles

The participants to be interviewed for this study will be the immediate past principal and current principal from a rural school located in the eastern central area of state of Georgia. A letter will be mailed and follow-up telephone calls made to the participant requesting their contribution. A biographical portraiture will be created of the principals involved in the study. Information provided from the portraiture includes educational background, work experiences, and years of administrative experience of the principals.

Some of the semi-structured follow up interview questions are as follows:

- As principal, do you view yourself as the instructional leader of your school? If yes, what examples can you discuss to demonstrate your instructional leadership?
- How would describe the culture and structure of your school from an instructional standpoint?
- How effective do you feel the professional learning communities are in your school? Explain your view.

The use of open-ended interview questions allows each participant to fully explain their views in a comprehensive manner. The researcher will attempt to facilitate the interview

through effective questioning techniques and prompting if necessary to encourage a comprehensive response from each participant.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher will interview the participants and transcribe the data. The study will use open-ended interviews to determine the principal's role in developing a professional learning community. The interviews will also gauge the structure and culture of the school from the point of view of the principal. To ensure accuracy of responses, electronic recording devices will be used during the interviews. Follow up interviews will be conducted as deemed necessary by the researcher for clarity. The data will be transcribed and coded for analysis, and to determine patterns in the responses.

Summary

Professional learning communities are required to be developed in all of Georgia's schools. Elementary principals are essential learners in helping improve achievement. The idea that elementary principals are simply administrators and supervisors is no longer valid. The quality of the principal relates to the capacity of the school to ensure achievement for all students. Because the expectations of student performance have increased, elementary principals realize that the environment should reflect a culture where collaboration is encouraged, but not forced.

Professional learning communities have become a latest professional development opportunity used to educational accountability in schools. Professional learning communities create an environment for improved student achievement and a climate conducive to teacher collaboration. Whether principals have a role in the development of professional learning communities is yet to be determined. Also, the structure of the

school and the culture that permeates collegiality among teachers and principals will be explored to determine whether such an environment promotes successful implementation of professional learning communities.

Determining the role principals play in nurturing the development of professional learning communities is significant as conditions improve and resources increase to support teachers in their continuous learning. Principals who share decision making with teachers on instructional issues and regard them as leaders promote school improvement and increased student achievement efforts. They transform and facilitate organizational structures for teachers to participate in decision making, with the purpose of improving autonomy and encouraging collaboration.

The determination of how elementary principals develop professional learning communities is the primary purpose of this research. However, the effect that structure and culture of the school has on the implementation of this initiative is also a pivotal component as well. The factors that lead to the development of effective professional learning communities are imperative to explain how schools can transform themselves from a teaching centered environment to a learning centered environment.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature review for this study is organized into three major sections – leadership styles and theories, school structure and culture, and the development of professional learning communities. The purpose of this review of literature is to assist in answering the primary research question, “How does a Georgia elementary school principal develop professional learning communities?”

The first section provides an overview of leadership styles, with an emphasis on transformational, transactional, and facilitative leadership. This section also includes a comprehensive summary of transformational leadership and transactional leadership theories for school leaders. The second section includes a characterization of school structure and culture and the potential impact on school improvement. An analysis of school climate and organization is conducted, with an emphasis on shared autonomy and job satisfaction within the framework of the school organization. The third section focuses on the understanding and development of professional learning communities. This section also will investigate the relationship of principals in school restructuring and reform efforts in their schools. The relationship between professional learning communities and school leadership, primarily the principal, will also be discussed.

Leadership Styles and Theories

Leadership is the knowledge of where you need to go, establishing and sharing a clear vision for a common purpose (Burns, 1985). It is the ability to inspire people to action and the ability to create leaders from followers. Leadership is a process by which a

person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent (Burns, 1978). Leaders carry out this process by applying their leadership attributes, such as beliefs, values, ethics, character, knowledge, and skills (Burns, 1985).

Leadership Styles

A study by Savery, Souter, and Dyson (1992) analyzing the preference for decision-making responsibilities was conducted with a sample of 136 deputy principals. The research methodology used an item questionnaire with the preferred style for making the decision concerning the specific situation being measured. The results suggested that there were several factors underlying the data collected, each with a different desired decision-making style (Savery, Souter, & Dyson, 1992). These preferred styles appeared to be influenced by personal skills and experiences that allowed each person to feel he or she could have some input into the decision. Therefore, administrators should consider implementing a system of leadership which recognizes that differences do exist concerning preferred leadership styles depending on the teachers' perceived impact of the decisions on the individual's work environment (Savery, Souter, & Dyson, 1992).

Varying leadership styles can have an impact on the worker performance. An article by Veenstra, Turner, and Reynolds (2003) discusses that very topic using two types of leadership styles- transformational and transactional. A transformational leadership style is thought responsible for performance, which is quantitatively greater and qualitatively different from other leadership styles (Veenstra, Turner, & Reynolds, 2003). There was some confusion as to the mechanism responsible for the shifts in performance, both quantitatively and qualitatively. A preliminary investigation into this

idea has been addressed in this article. Results indicated that leadership styles such as transformational and transactional do impact on a range of potentially positive outcomes, such as motivation to perform tasks (Veenstra, Turner, & Reynolds, 2003). These relationships were qualified by the extent to which there is a shared sense of understanding of the leader.

The perception of leadership styles can have a dramatic impact on the development of initiatives designed to impact the working environment in a positive manner. Huffman (2001) discusses how the professional learning community concept provides a process for stakeholders to engage collaboratively in discussions to ensure school improvement and student academic achievement. The purpose of this research was to analyze processes of professional learning communities and perceived relationships to school effectiveness, and determine perceived relationships between the processes and the leadership style of the principal (Huffman, 2001). Educators enrolled in Masters level educational administration classes believed their schools reflect processes of a professional learning community at least some of the time. The processes named most often were:

- a. Providing a safe environment for diverse ideas, beliefs, and strategies.
- b. Being a democratic organization guided by positive principles, ethics, and values.

Participants also believed in the collaborative style of leadership by the principal influenced the presence of professional learning community characteristics. Significant relationships between organizational description and leadership styles of principals were found (Huffman, 2001).

Leadership styles can be interpreted differently, depending on a variety of variables, including gender (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). As women increasingly enter leadership roles that traditionally have been occupied mainly by men, the possibility that the leadership styles of women and men differ continues to attract attention. The focus of these debates on sameness versus difference can obscure the array of causal factors that can produce differences or similarities. Adopting the perspective of social role theory, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) offered a framework that encompasses many of the complexities of the empirical literature on the leadership styles of men and women. As they reviewed the interpersonally oriented, task-oriented, autocratic, and democratic styles of women and men, new data concerning the transformational and transactional leadership styles were presented (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

An article by Nelton (1991) explored how many of today's companies are making room for diversity by drawing on the complementary leadership styles of men and women. The premise of this literature centered around two questions: how do male and female leadership traits differ and how do men and women learn from each other (Nelton, 1991)? The answers to those questions both involved the idea of leadership versus management; men more often demonstrated leadership than management, while women more often exhibited management than leadership (Nelton, 1991).

Morris, Guat Tin, and Coleman (1999) investigated the role of women in leadership through a sample of female Singaporean secondary school principals perceived leadership styles and compared their responses to a similar study carried out recently of female English head teachers. The educational systems of England and

Singapore were quite different. The English environment allowed school significant autonomy in personnel management and the majority of the head teachers were male (Morris, Guat Tin, & Coleman, 1999). In contrast, the Singaporean educational environment was quite centralized, including the management of careers, and the proportion of female senior managers were much higher (Morris, Guat Tin, & Coleman, 1999). Interviews were conducted with 11 female Singaporean principals to identify their styles of management, leadership perspectives, and attitudes. The discussion focused on whether or not the styles of the principals in relation to “masculine” or “feminine” stereotypes of leadership were similar to those of the English head teachers (Morris, Guat Tin, & Coleman, 1999). Further comparison was made of the attributes of the two sets of principals, including styles of management, decision-making, working environment, need for vision, and values (Morris, Guat Tin, & Coleman, 1999). The results showed a more “masculine” stereotype of female Singaporean principals, while English head teachers were described as more “feminine” when comparing leadership styles and attributes.

Savelsbergh and Staebler (1995) examined the relationship among leadership styles, personality preferences, and effectiveness as a consultant teacher. The sample consisted of 31 consultant teachers. Three instruments were administered: the LEAD-Self, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and the Survey of Effectiveness of Collaborative Consultants. The raw scores indicated that selling and participating were the two leadership styles most often used. No significant relationship was found between consultant teachers’ effectiveness scores and their leadership styles. The significant relation found was between the personality index preference and consulting effectiveness.

A study by Hofman and Hofman (2001) presented the findings of research into leadership and management of secondary education. Based on data from almost 100 secondary schools (administrators and department heads), three different styles of leadership were distinguished— transformational, transactional, and facilitative. These styles were based on the extent to which school leaders and department heads make use of a set of mechanisms based on Mintzberg’s configuration theory (Hofman & Hofman, 2001). Analysis has been used to determine the extent to which these leadership styles affect student performance. Results showed that transformational leadership fit the definition of an effective type of management (Hofman & Hofman, 2001). In schools with such a leadership style, students reached higher achievement levels in mathematics than students in other schools (Hofman & Hofman, 2001).

A study by Jung (2001) discussed the use of transformational versus facilitative leadership in a real versus nominal group experiment to examine the effect of different leadership styles. Participants performed a brainstorming task, and their performance was assessed using fluency and flexibility. Results clearly supported the hypotheses in that the participants in the transformational leadership condition and in the nominal group condition outperformed their counterparts in the facilitative leadership condition and in the real group condition (Jung, 2001). This pattern was consistent across using both fluency and flexibility measures (Jung, 2001).

An article by Oplatka (2004) revisited the perspectives of educational leadership and challenges their assumptions from the standpoint of the experience of the principal, the concept of individual progress through a series of stages characterized by a unique set of issues or tasks. The author claimed the need to consider the principal’s decision

making in the perspective of educational leadership, on the grounds that the assumptions underlying different leadership styles are more likely to be appropriate for diverse principals (Oplatka, 2004).

Leadership Theories

Yukl (1989) defined leadership as an interaction between two or more persons. He also stated that leadership involves an influence process that is intentional and exerted by leaders over followers. According to Moorhead and Griffin (1998), studies conducted at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center focused on identifying leadership characteristics that impacted group performance. Two basic forms of leadership behaviors identified were ‘production-centered’ leader behavior and ‘employee-centered’ leader behavior. Hoy and Miskel (1991, p. 269) cite Vroom in summarizing the findings of the Michigan studies:

- More effective leaders tend to have a relationship with their subordinates that are supportive and tend to enhance the followers’ sense of self-esteem.
- More effective leaders use group rather than person-to-person methods of supervision and decision-making.
- More effective leaders tend to set higher performance goals.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) expanded the concept of effective leadership with their situational leadership theory. It focused on the relationship between leadership style and the readiness of the subordinate. The contingency theory of leadership behavior is a well-known and empirically tested contextual leader behavior model. Leader effectiveness is viewed as a function of leader behavior and contextual factors. In a

contingency leadership model, the leader's personality traits were either task-motivated behavior or relationship-motivated (Moorhead & Griffin, 1998).

The maturity level of the follower determined the most effective combination of task and relationship approaches. Their model is similar to path transformational leadership theory and focused on the extent to which subordinates should be involved in the decision-making process (Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Moorhead & Griffin, 1998). Hersey and Blanchard (1982) argued that leadership behavior affects the effectiveness of the organization and that changes in the organization affect the next leadership intervention. In this instance, transactional leadership theory is defined as working with and involving people to achieve a particular organizational goal (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1987).

Transformational Leadership Theory

The emergence of the concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns in 1978 and presented an alternative to the contingency theories. As first conceptualized, there were two types of leaders—the facilitative leader and the transformational leader (Conley & Goldman, 1994). The facilitative leader uses contingent reinforcement, either positive contingent reward or the more negative active or passive forms of management by exception (Conley & Goldman, 1994). The transformational leader articulates a vision of the future that is shared with peers and subordinates; intellectually stimulates followers; is cognitive of individual differences among people; is likely to use personal resources including time, knowledge, and experience; and serves as a coach, teacher, and mentor (Yammarino & Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1989). Bass, Waldman, Avolio, and Bebb (1987) found that transformational leaders

attract strong feelings of identity, excitement, and expectations by focusing on ideas and creating a vision for their followers.

In an ethnographic single case study, Lontos (1993) profiled a school principal using observations and interviews. Walker's (1993) classification strands of transformational leadership were used to describe the principal. Lontos concluded that the partnership-oriented style of the principal resulted in teachers feeling empowered. Lontos also reported that the principal was caring, developed collaborative goals, and led by example.

In a meta-analytical review of 39 studies using Avolio and Bass's (1987) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire to assess transformational and transactional leadership, Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam (1996) found that key elements of transformational leadership correlated positively with subordinate satisfaction and performance. Contingent reward, a transactional behavior, also was correlated positively with the criteria, although the results were weaker and less consistent. In descriptive studies based on interviews and observations, it was also discovered that transformational leadership is effective in a variety of different situations (Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Transformational leadership supplements facilitative leadership and does not substitute for transactional leadership. Bartol and Martin (2000) contend that even the most successful transformational leaders need transactional skills to manage the day-to-day affairs of the business. Bass and his colleagues (Avolio and Bass, 1987; Bass & Avolio, 1989; Bass, 1985; Bass, 1990a; Bass, 1990b; Bass, 1997; Hater and Bass, 1988) conducted extensive empirical and quantitative research on transformational and transactional leaders. Avolio and Bass (1987) found overwhelming evidence supporting

the concept that transformational leadership appears to exist at many levels of organizational settings. According to Bass (1997), transformational leadership can be taught and learned.

Transformational leaders are described as creative and innovative in thinking (Bass, 1997). These leaders provide followers with ideas that enable them to generate solutions by looking at problems from various perspectives (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Kirby, Paradise, and King's (1992) study on transformational leadership in education analyzed the degree to which leaders were perceived as exhibiting transformational and transactional behaviors. In the first part of the study, over 100 educators who responded to the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Avolio & Bass, 1987) revealed that higher levels of satisfaction and performance were associated with transformational leadership (Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992). The second part of the study required a different group of 58 educators to write a descriptive narrative on extraordinary leadership. In the findings from an analysis of participants' narratives, indications were that modeling, challenging behaviors, and promoting high expectations inspired followers to higher levels of performance.

Transformational leaders are never satisfied and are always seeking to utilize creative thinking and encourage new approaches to the resolution of problems (Bass, 1985). Bass and Avolio (1994) contend that transformational leaders, by acting as coaches and mentors, can attend to each individual's needs. In the delegation of tasks, there is an emphasis on the creation of a supportive climate as a means of developing the potential of colleagues and subordinates. The leader promotes a climate of trust where

each individual is heard and treated with respect and dignity (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Research by Leithwood and his colleagues moved transformational leadership—already established in the corporate world—into the educational setting. Leithwood, reviewing the dimensions of transformational leadership as postulated by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), developed dimensions relevant and specific to the educational setting. Transformational leadership in the school setting was defined along six leadership and management dimensions. The leadership dimensions identified by Leithwood and Jantzi (1996) are:

- Building school vision and goals by developing, identifying, and communicating the vision for the school and inspiring teachers.
- Providing intellectual stimulation by challenging teachers to be continuous learners.
- Providing individualized support by showing concern and respect for the personal needs of teachers and giving encouragement and support.
- Providing an appropriate role model by being ethical and moral in behavior while accepting responsibilities and sharing the risk with teachers.
- Demonstrating high performance and expectations by communicating through actions that are goal-oriented.

Developing structures to foster participation by creating an atmosphere of trust for teachers to freely collaborate and share ideas for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of the school. The four management dimensions are (1) staffing, (2) instructional support, (3) monitoring school activities, and (4) community focus

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). These managerial operations, according to Leithwood and Jantzi, are “fundamental to organizational stability” (p. 454).

In organizations where change occurs frequently, it is argued that transformational leadership style produces the best results, benefiting the organization as a whole (Leithwood, 1996). Transformational leadership engages understanding of the human environment and attending to the strategic environment. It involves developing human resources and anticipating, rather than reacting to, the need for organizational change and development.

Empirical research (Hater & Bass, 1988; Howell, & Avolio, 1993; Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995) found a positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational performance. In an empirical study of 78 managers, Howell and Avolio (1993) found that transformational leadership directly and positively predicted unit-level performance. In a study conducted in Singapore, Koh, Steers, and Terborg (1995) reported a high level of performance of high school students whose institutions were managed by charismatic leaders. Hater and Bass (1988) found that managers identified independently as top performers were rated higher on transformational leadership than a randomly chosen group of ordinary managers.

Transformational leadership in the world of business has been identified as the factor that improved the work force and ultimately determined the success or failure of the organization (Bennis, 1978). Larson (1980) suggested that principals play a role similar to business leaders by creating the organizational context and establishing linkages among teachers to allow for cohesiveness and improved collaboration. Additionally, principals can institute policies and practices within their control critical to

improve effectiveness (Mortimore & Sammons, 1987). Moorhead and Griffin (1998) emphasized similar views for managers, arguing that in “relying on formal power in formal dimensions of influence," principals are able to "guide and direct the efforts of others toward organizational effectiveness" (p. 350).

Azumi and Madhere (1983) examined principal effectiveness as a function of principal leadership style. They found that principals who utilized a system incorporating rich feedback, while focusing on socialization as a means of achieving the organizational goals, had greater teacher conformity and higher student achievement than those who relied on programming and sanctions as methods of control. Transformational leaders used their relationships with followers to raise themselves as well as their followers to higher levels of achievement (Bass, 1997). Relationship building was an important aspect of transformational leadership. Research has consistently argued that transformational leaders increased group performance by empowering their followers to perform their jobs independently of their leader’s direct supervision and control (Avolio & Bass, 1987).

A transformational leader worked effectively within a more horizontal organizational structure (Bass, 1985). This implied that the leader’s roles and responsibilities are coordinated effectively with other formal and informal leaders of the organization. Transformational leaders are sometimes directive with their followers and often seek followers’ participation in group work by highlighting the importance of cooperation and collective task performance, providing the opportunity to learn from shared experience, and delegating authority for followers to execute any necessary action for effective performance (Bass, 1985).

Transactional Leadership Theory

Transactional leaders used exchange rewards contingent upon performance and positional resources in order to encourage desired behaviors of followers. Transactional leaders clarified role and task requirements to guide or motivate their followers in the direction of established goals (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Bass (1990b, p. 20) stated that leadership that is based on transactions between managers and employees was called transactional leadership. Daft (1999, p. 427) referred to transactional leadership as a "traditional management function." The traditional management function was typical of leaders who initiate structure, clarify the role and task requirements of subordinates, and provide appropriate rewards to meet the social needs of subordinates. The transactional leader's ability to satisfy subordinates and do extremely well at management functions improves productivity.

Transactional leadership is a continuous interaction between leaders and followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The focus is on rewarding or using other forms of reinforcement in exchange for satisfactorily carrying out the assignment, or on taking corrective actions for failure to meet objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transactional leaders completed administrative tasks and often emphasize the impersonal aspects of performance, such as budgets, plans, and schedules. Transactional leaders revealed a deep sense of commitment to the organization and conform to the organization's norms and values. Burns (1978) contended that transactional leadership reveals values relevant to the exchange process, such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and reciprocity. Yukl (1998) asserts that transactional leaders motivate their employees by appealing to their self-

interest. The transactional leader interfered only when the required standards are not being met (Bass, 1990a).

In summary, transactional leadership is based on an exchange process whereby followers are rewarded for accomplishing specific goals (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). The exchange relationship between transactional leaders and their followers is based on an implied contract that involves positive reinforcement for a higher level of performance (Waldman, Bass, & Yammarino, 1990). Transactional leaders recognized the follower's needs and desires and clarify how those needs and desires will be met in exchange for enactment of the follower's work role (Bass, 1985).

School Structure and Culture

School structure and culture refers to the sum of values, culture, and organizational structures that cause it to function and react in particular ways (O'Brien & Brandt, 1997). Teaching practices, diversity and the relationship between principals, teachers, parents, and students contribute to the school culture. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, school structure refers to the organizational dynamic under which a school functions while school culture refers to the way teachers and other staff members work together (O'Brien & Brandt, 1997).

Successful leaders have learned to view their organizations' environment in an inclusive manner (Burns, 1985). This broad outlook is what the concept of school culture offered principals and other leaders (Beck & Murphy, 1993). It gave them a wider framework for understanding complex problems and complex relationships within the school (Beck & Murphy, 1993). By expanding their understanding of school culture,

these leaders were better equipped to promote the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment (Cheng, 1993).

The field of education lacked a clear and consistent definition of school culture. The term has been used synonymously with a variety of terms, including "climate," "ethos," and "saga" (Deal & Peterson, 1990). The concept of culture came to education from the corporate workplace with the idea that it would provide direction for a more professional and secure learning atmosphere. Deal and Peterson (1990) noted that the definition of culture includes deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of the school's history. Heckman (1993) reminded us that school culture lies in the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students, and principals. The definition of school culture went beyond the business of creating an efficient learning environment (Heckman, 1993). It focused more on the core values necessary to teach and influence young minds (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Thus, school culture can be defined as the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community (Heckman, 1993).

Researchers Deal and Peterson (1990) have collected some inspiring evidence on school culture. Healthy and positive school cultures correlate strongly with improved student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction (Deal & Peterson, 1990). School culture also correlates with teachers' attitudes toward their work. In a study that profiled effective and ineffective organizational cultures, Yin Cheong Cheng (1993) found strong school cultures had highly motivated teachers. In an environment with strong organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic

leadership, and intimacy, teachers experienced higher job satisfaction and increased productivity.

Instructional and Organizational Structure

Supportive conditions can determine where and how the staff regularly comes together as a unit to complete the learning, decision-making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). The following are physical factors that are identified in supporting learning communities: time to meet and discuss, smaller school size and close physical proximity of the staff members to each another, teaching roles that are interdependent, communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment (Louis & Kruse, 1995). A list of Boyd's (1992) physical factors in a context conducive to school change and improvement are similar: the availability of resources; schedules and structures that reduce teacher isolation; and policies that provide more teacher autonomy, foster collaboration, provide for effective communication, and provide for professional staff development.

Today, prevailing views of leadership suggest that the principal's role should not be to direct others but to create a school culture in which decisions are made collaboratively (Dufour, 2002). Such leadership exercises power 'through' others, not 'over' them (Conley & Goldman, 1994). The basic question is whether or not the two leadership styles previously mentioned are mutually exclusive.

Current definitions of instructional leadership are richer and more expansive than those of the past (King, 2002). Originally, the role involved traditional tasks such as setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum,

monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, instructional leadership includes much deeper involvement in the core technology of teaching and learning. It carries more sophisticated views of professional learning, and emphasizes the use of data to make decisions (King, 2002).

Attention has shifted from teaching to learning, and some now prefer the term learning leader to instructional leader (Dufour, 2002). Although instructional leadership is acknowledged to be a critical skill in educational administration, few principals and superintendents have had in-depth training for that role, especially in a standards-based environment (King, 2002). A definitive description of instructional leadership includes much deeper involvement in the core technology of teaching and learning, carry more sophisticated views of professional development, and emphasize the use of data to make decisions (King, 2002).

The most effective change in school culture happens when principals, teachers, and students model the values and beliefs important to the institution (Deal & Peterson, 1990). The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as "what is important" (Dufour, 2002). A principal who acts with care and concern for others is more likely to develop a school culture with similar values (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 1992). Likewise, the principal who has little time for others places an implicit stamp of approval on selfish behaviors and attitudes (Deal & Peterson, 1990).

Teacher Autonomy and Job Satisfaction

A report by the National Center of Educational Statistics (1997) on morale among teachers in the United States identified working conditions that contributed to greater teacher satisfaction, which include administrative leadership, student behavior, and

teacher autonomy. Favorable working conditions were positively related to teacher job satisfaction, regardless of whether a teacher worked in a public or private school, elementary or secondary school, and regardless of teachers' background characteristics or the demographics of the schools (Davis & Wilson, 2000).

Because schools often create a culture of relative isolation for teachers, they have little opportunity to share in their success with their peers and administrators (Van der Vegt, 2002). Stress levels among teachers are often a result of such isolation as well. It can result in emotional and physical fatigue and a reduction in work motivation, involvement, and satisfaction (Gismondi Haser & Nasser, 2003). Feeling overly stressed can result in erosion of one's ideals and enthusiasm (Stendlund, 1995).

While the relationship between job satisfaction and teacher autonomy has not yet been significantly correlated, high levels of job satisfaction of teachers has been shown to have a positive effect on students. A study by Peck, Fox, and Morston (1977) revealed that teachers with strong positive attitudes about teaching had students whose self-esteem was high. Students seemed to recognize the effectiveness of teachers who are satisfied with their teaching performance (Stendlund, 1995). Mertler (2002) suggested that this association exists because teachers serve as more than just educators; they are role models. The benefits of satisfaction for both teachers and students pointed out the importance of studying how teachers feel about their jobs.

People who feel empowered tend to have higher job satisfaction (Jones, 1995). Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan (1993) suggested in their study that people are more personally invested in their work with an organization when they have a voice in what happens to them and their work has meaning and significance in contributing to a higher

purpose or goal. By treating teachers in ways that empower them, such as involving them in decisions about policies and practices and acknowledging their expertise, school administrators helped sustain high job satisfaction (Berman, 1987; Bogler, 2001).

The understanding that a relationship exists between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction is very apparent through the analysis of research (Woods & Weasmer, 2002). Therefore, it is very important that teachers not only have increased autonomy but also job satisfaction (Stendlund, 1995). Sylvia and Hutchinson (1985) concluded that teacher job satisfaction is based in the freedom to try new ideas, achievement of appropriate responsibility levels, and intrinsic work elements. Because of this, the possibility for a positive relationship between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction could exist. Many factors have been examined in an attempt to find which of these promote job satisfaction (McDonough, 2003) and teacher autonomy (Koehler, 1990). The relation between job satisfaction and teacher autonomy derives from the gratification of higher order needs, social relations, esteem, and actualization rather than lower order needs (Sylvia & Hutchinson, 1985). To further examine this, respondents were asked to measure their levels of teacher autonomy and job satisfaction.

Principals can nurture the human capacity needs of professional learning communities by helping the staff relate to each other, providing social activities for staff members to get to know each other on a personal level, and creating a caring environment. Teachers require an environment that values and supports hard work and provides opportunities for challenging tasks, risk-taking, and the promotion of growth (Midgley & Wood, 1993). Shared personal practice contributes to such a setting. Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements of this kind of workplace. In

such schools, teachers and other staff members experienced more satisfaction and higher morale, while students dropped out less often and cut fewer classes. Both staff and students posted lower rates of absenteeism (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995).

Developing Professional Learning Communities

Critical reflection and engaging collegial activities expose teachers to the practices of professional learning communities that provide them with the opportunities to learn new ways of teaching (Kurse, Louis, & Brykl, 1995). These practices focus on the development of shared norms that were centered on student learning and collective responsibility for school operations and improvement. In professional learning communities, behavioral guidelines were internally developed and agreed upon, rather than externally imposed in a bureaucratic fashion (Hord, 1996).

What are Professional Learning Communities?

The term professional learning community branded schools in which interaction among teachers was frequent and their actions were shared and governed by norms focused on the improvement of teaching and learning (Hord, 1996). The three core beliefs that described faculty behavior in a school-based professional learning community were (1) reflective dialogue among teachers about instructional methods and student learning, (2) an open system of practice in which teachers observe each using a joint problem-solving mode, and (3) peer collaboration in which teachers engage in actual shared work (Marzano, 2003).

In education terminology, the term professional learning community has become routine when discussing staff development opportunities (Dufour, 2002). It has been used to define any number of ideas, such as extending classroom practice into the community;

bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and principals simultaneously in learning (Dufour, 2002).

Rosenholtz (1989) brought teachers' workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. Support by means of teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles increased teacher efficiency in meeting students' needs. Further, Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers with a high sense of their own efficiency were more likely to adopt new classroom procedures and also more likely to stay in the profession.

Historical Background of Professional Learning Communities

A variety of professional learning community models exist in education (Dufour, 2002). Many researchers on the subject of professional learning communities have offered explanations or characteristics of these communities. Some of the most common characteristics include collaboration, shared vision, a focus on student learning, and peer coaching with feedback (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Most of the professional learning community models focus on teachers, not principals. In 1995, a more recent and ongoing professional learning community initiative was formed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (1998).

The Annenberg Institute at Brown University created the National School Reform faculty, a professional learning initiative designed to assist teachers and principals with the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning (Annenberg Institute for School

Reform, 1998). The Annenberg Institute for School Reform created a professional development model as a result of communicating with school administrators and teachers with experience in professional learning and school reform. The teachers and principals believed that professional development needed to be collaborative and occur at school in order to meet the needs of the faculty (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). Additionally, the program developers, teachers, and principals were dissatisfied with the traditional professional development including a scripted workshop led by a trainer. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) influenced the Institute with the idea that teachers that practiced collegiality increased the number of teachers who wanted to improve their instructional practices. As a result, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform developed the Critical Friends Group (CFG) that served as an innovative professional learning initiative for teachers and principals (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998).

By 1996, the Annenberg Institute conducted a two-year study to determine the effectiveness of the CFG (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). Thirteen schools participated in a pilot study that led to revisions in the design and training of the initiative. The researchers found that teachers in CFGs were more collaborative than those who did not participate in CFGs (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). The pilot study did include research on principals of schools where CFGs existed. The study found that in schools where CFGs were successful, principals were supportive of the initiative as well as the members of CFGs as well (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). The study also found that principals who were supportive of CFGs had a leadership style that included the following: (1) teachers were included in decision making regarding teaching and learning, (2) principals publicly encouraged teacher

collaboration, (3) classroom decisions by teachers were supported, and (4) principals promoted the concept that student learning is the responsibility of the entire faculty and staff (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998).

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform created four core beliefs as a result of their extensive research:

- People working together can make lasting improvements in their schools.
- Teachers and principals must work together to turn theories into practice and standards into student learning.
- The development of a “learning community” is key in the effort to collaboratively analyze both adult and student work.
- In order to create learning communities, practitioners need quality training and sustained support. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998).

In much of the research on professional learning communities, the role of the principal is defined as support for the learning community. However, according to Dufour (1999), principals should not just be developers and facilitators of professional development: they need to participate in professional learning communities.

Attributes of Professional Learning Communities

The literature on professional learning communities repeatedly gave attention to five attributes of such organizational arrangements: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) collective creativity, (3) shared values and vision, (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared personal practice (Dufour, 2002).

The school change and educational leadership literatures clearly recognized the role and influence of the principal on whether change will occur in the school (Dufour &

Eaker, 1998). It seemed clear that changing a school organization into a professional learning community can be done only with the sanction of the leaders and the active nurturing of the development of the staff as a community (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seemed a good beginning for explaining what these learning communities are and how the principal accepted a collegial relationship with teachers to share leadership, power, and decision making (Dufour, 2002).

This new relationship existed between principals and teachers led to shared and collegial leadership in the school, where all develop professionally and learn to view themselves as all working together as a team toward the same purpose: school improvement (Hord, 1996). Sergiovanni clarified that the causes of power for leadership were deep-rooted in shared ideas (1994), not in the influence of position. Dufour (2002) asserted that it is also important that the principal believe that teachers have the capacity to respond to the needs of students, that this belief provided strength for principals to meet difficult political and educational challenges along the way. Marzano (2003) added that the principal's job is to create an environment in which the staff can learn continuously.

An additional dimension, then, was a principal of the school who supported and encouraged continuous development of its professionals (Leithwood, 1996). This examination suggested that no longer should leaders be thought of as change agents of the organization; instead leaders must be regarded as self-sufficient, encouraging teachers to develop their leadership potential (Leithwood, 1996). The idea of a learning organization where professionals continually expand their ability to create the results they

truly desire, where new and creative ways of thinking are nurtured, where collective ambition is supported, and where people are continually learning how to learn cooperatively attracted the attention of educators who were struggling to develop and implement reform in the our schools (Jung, 2001). As a paradigm shift was explored by educators and shared in educational journals, the label became professional learning communities (Hord, 1997).

In schools, the learning community is demonstrated by people from multiple constituencies, at all levels, collaboratively and continually working together (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Such collaborative work is grounded in what Newmann (reported by Brandt, 1995) and Louis and Kruse label reflective dialogue, in which staff conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems. Sergiovanni (1994) referred to these activities as inquiry, and believed that as principals and teachers inquire together, they create community. Inquiry helped them to overcome rifts caused by various specializations of grade level and subject matter. Inquiry forces discussion among teachers about what is important (Sergiovanni, 1994). Inquiry promoted understanding and appreciation for the work of other teachers (Sergiovanni, 1994). And inquiry helped principals and teachers created the ties that bond them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas (Sergiovanni, 1994). Inquiry, in other words, helped principals and teachers became a community of learners (Hord, 1997).

Vision is one of the most frequently used buzzwords in the education literature of the 1990s (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This concept presents an overview of visionary leadership, which many education experts consider to be a make-or-break task for the

school leader. It discussed various definitions of vision, the significance of vision for organizations, the ways in which visions develop, the top-down and bottom-up nature of vision, and the ways in which leaders facilitate vision (Dufour, 2002). This concept also outlined the ethical values and responsibilities of school leaders and the dilemmas that they face. It offered the following suggestions for resolving ethical dilemmas: (1) Leaders should have and be willing to act on a definite sense of ethical standards; (2) leaders should examine dilemmas from different perspectives; (3) leaders can reframe ethical issues; and (4) leaders should have the habit of conscious reflection (Dufour, 2002).

A vision for creating a healthy school culture should be a collaborative activity among teachers, students, parents, staff, and the principal (Hofman & Hofman, 2001). A good deal of evidence suggested that a strong sense of community in schools has value for both staff members and students, while providing a necessary foundation for school improvement (Hord, 1997). The development of professional learning communities (PLC) depends upon the current elements of school communities, the effects of school community on staff members and students, the structural and organizational factors of community in schools, and the relationship of community to other improvement activities (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996).

Several kinds of factors determined when, where, and how the staff could regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision-making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. In order for learning communities to function productively, the physical or structural conditions and the human qualities and capacities of the people involved must be optimal (Boyd, 1992; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the following physical factors that support learning communities: time to meet and talk, small school size and physical proximity of the staff to one another, interdependent teaching roles, well-developed communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. An additional factor is the staff's input in selecting teachers and administrators for the school, and even encouraging staff who are not in tune with the program to find work elsewhere (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Boyd (1992) presented a similar inventory of physical factors that resulted in an environment conducive to school change and improvement: the availability of resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation of teachers; policies that promote increased autonomy, foster collaboration, improve effective communication, and provide for professional development. Time was clearly a resource (Blase & Blase, 2000). Time, or more properly lack of it, was one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts. (Barth, 1991). Time was a significant issue for faculties who wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier, when it is not available, and a supportive factor, when it is available, by faculties and staffs engaging in school improvement.

Perhaps most important, leaders must view their organizations as learning communities, for faculty as well as students (Marzano, 2003) This required casting school improvement in terms of hypotheses to be tested rather than solutions to be handed out, attacking the barriers to collaboration, and making decisions democratically rather than bureaucratically (Dufour, 2002). When the spirit of inquiry permeates the daily routine, schools were on their way to becoming professional learning communities. (Marzano, 2003).

A growing number of educators are focusing their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching (Boyd, 1992). In place of the typical school's norms and practices that isolate teachers from one another, collaborative schools have norms that encourage teachers and principals to cooperate for school improvement (Sergiovanni, 1994). Such schools are characterized by frequent teacher interaction with respect to teaching methods and problems, frequent observation and constructive criticism of teachers, joint planning and preparation, and peer training and support (Jones, 1995).

Professional Learning Communities and Leadership

The goal of a 5-year project studying professional learning communities sponsored by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) was to examine the impact of shared values and visions on the development of professional learning communities (Huffman, 2001). The study was conducted in 18 school sites, with varying grade configurations and a diverse economic and demographic student population. The principal and the teacher leader were interviewed by a "Co-Developer." The Co-Developers were identified as educators who participated in collecting and analyzing the data for the research. The research data collected by the Co-Developers involved interviews using audiotapes that were transcribed and analyzed using the five dimensions of professional learning communities as a conceptual framework (Hord, 1997).

The study incorporated a holistic approach by placing schools in clusters on a continuum ranging from established to less established (Huffman, 2001). Inter-rater reliability techniques were used to distinguish between and among clusters by Co-Developers. Characteristics of schools were studied in detail and condensed into phases of development; these characteristics were used to differentiate between schools based on

the categories of more or less mature in the development of professional learning communities. The characteristics identified early in the analysis were used to identify major phases of development that were processed into the operational model to describe the continuum of professional learning communities (Huffman, 2001). The data analyzed using the dimensions of Hord's (1997) model of professional learning communities revealed that seven schools, categorized as mature, had better results than schools categorized as less mature (Huffman, 2001).

Empirical research findings point to the conclusion that schools that focused on improving student learning are successfully redesigning themselves to become organizations that continually learn and invent new ways to increase the effectiveness of their work (Rosenholtz, 1989). Effective teachers are those who are supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice and are more committed when compared to teachers who are not supported (Rosenholtz, 1989). Methods that provide support for teachers are identified as being organized in networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles that increase teacher efficacy for meeting students' needs.

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) supported Rosenholtz's (1989) findings that suggested that when teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and related learning, the results were a widely shared body of wisdom concerning teaching. Shared decision making became widely discussed as a factor related to curriculum reform connected to the transformation of teaching roles (Darling & Hammond, 1996).

Researchers began observing improvements in schools where faculties were functioning as learning communities (Brandt, 1996; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995;

Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In schools that have professional learning communities, individual talent and commitment are harnessed into group efforts that push for high-quality learning for all students (Brandt, 1995). Teachers' collaborative work is grounded in active dialogue and inquiry where the staff conducts conversations about teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems (Hord, 1997). The level of shared leadership is dependent upon the principal's willingness to share authority and his or her ability to motivate teachers to take on new responsibilities (Hord, 1997). Shared leadership emerged as a critical component of successful professional learning communities.

The emphasis for school-based leadership teams is collaboration of strengths and expertise, reinforcing the need for all members to share a common view of both the purposes of the team and its methods of operations (Gronn, 2002). Many school-based reform initiatives mandate the creation of school leadership teams with school improvement as a main focus. The literature on teams is similar to the argument for coercive action outlined by Gronn (2002) in that team activity can amount to more than the aggregate sum of individual action. Teams identified and created for specific initiatives and formal teams must recreate a consensus about ways of working. Gronn (2002) stipulates that both kinds of teams operate best in an open climate, where relationships are based on trust, support from school leadership, and mutual protection.

Several empirical researchers found positive relationships between transformational leadership and organizational performance. In a study conducted in Singapore, Koh, Steers, & Terborg (1995) reported a high level of performance of high school students whose institutions were managed by charismatic leaders. A second

empirical study on a sample of 78 managers by Howell and Avolio (1993) found that transformational leadership directly and positively predicted unit-level performance.

Hater and Bass (1988) found that managers identified independently as top performers were rated higher on transformational leadership than the randomly chosen group of ordinary managers.

Professional Learning Communities and the Principal

Transforming the school's organization into a professional learning community is accomplished when leaders actively nurture the entire staff as a professional learning community (Hord, 1996). The traditional pattern of teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completely altered. It is the principal's role to keep reminding stakeholders of the vision. School leaders must communicate an image of the vision of the organization, sharing pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment from the faculty. "There is no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (Kleine-Kracht, 1993, p. 393).

The principal's form of leadership can impact the effectiveness of the school's professional learning community (Dufour, 2002). In many situations, especially in large school environments, organizational design and administrative tasks require all formal leadership personnel to be involved in technical aspects of the school's operations, including implementation of school-wide reform initiatives (Cheng, 1993). Thus, leadership would have to be transformed in order to have a restructured school (Leithwood, 1993; Lontos, 1993). Unfortunately, empirical studies are limited on the impact of principals' leadership styles on school reform initiatives, including professional learning communities. School administrators are encouraged to "re-culture" teacher

professionalism by increasing collegial interaction through shared decision making in professional growth initiatives (Darling-Hammond & Mclaughlin, 1995; Hord, 1997; Rottier, 1996).

Professional Learning Communities' Impact on Student Achievement

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools completed a rigorous four-year longitudinal case study researching schools and the factors associated with student achievement (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). The data covered 1500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States, with field research in 44 schools in 16 states. The results showed that comprehensive redesign of schools including decentralization, shared decision-making, schools within schools, teachers teaming, and professional communities can improve student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). The researchers published findings on a study of 11,000 students enrolled and 820 secondary schools across the United States. In schools that were characterized as professional learning communities, the staff worked collegially to change their classroom pedagogy. As a result, they engaged students in high intellectual learning tasks and students achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than students in traditionally organized schools.

In addition, the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller and learning was distributed more equitably (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). In five schools that successfully operated as professional learning communities, noticeable evidence indicated that the administrator is vital to the existence of a professional learning community. All of the schools examined had structural challenges for administrative redesign to provide the opportunity for profound change. The schools'

administrative staffs had a realistic understanding of change as a process that requires an ongoing commitment that, oftentimes, simply reduces to perseverance. The principal constantly nurtured those who understood the value of becoming a professional learning community and persuaded those who had yet to recognize the value of a professional learning community.

Teacher perceptions from high and low performing schools were used in a study on professional learning communities by AEL (Regional Educational Laboratory) (Meehan & Cowely, 2003). The schools that participated were selected from two different states, with performance identification labels based on the respective state department of education analysis of student achievement. The instrument used in the study was the AEL Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire (AEL CSIQ) measuring teachers' commitment to continuous learning and improvement. The instrument is comprised of six key concepts measuring continuous learning and improvement: effective teaching; shared leadership; purposeful student assessment; shared goals for learning; school, family, and community connections; and learning culture (Meehan & Cowely, 2003). The results from the research indicated that performance of the school, based on student achievement, was not an accurate indicator of the performance of the professional learning community; high performing schools are not always high-performing learning communities (Meehan & Cowely, 2003).

Summary

Schools in general are identified as open systems that are responding to the demands of school-wide reform and restructuring by utilizing transformational leadership and professional learning communities (Hord, 1996; Levin, 1993). Years of research on

leadership style include principals as transformational, transactional, or facilitative leaders impacting the professional learning community in schools (Hofman & Hofman, 2001). Empirical research has indicated a strong relationship between the dimensions of effective leadership and the dimensions of professional learning community constructs such as trust, collaboration, vision, and shared leadership (Hord, 1996; Halter & Bass, 1988; Leithwood, 1997). Also, the relationship between transactional leaders and their supporters is based on an indirect agreement that involves positive support for an improved level of performance (Waldman, Bass, & Yammarino, 1990).

The main focus of professional learning communities is developing collaborative efforts for learning with goals of improving student learning (Hord, 1996). Leaders use relationships with followers to raise the learning community to higher levels of achievement, emphasizing the change in structure and culture of the organization (Hord, 1996). The effectiveness of principal leadership is essential for school restructuring and professional learning communities (Hord, 1996; Leithwood, 1996). Teacher perceptions of leaders and varying levels of teacher autonomy can be influenced by loyalty to the principal (Reiss & Hoy, 1998). Reiss and Hoy (1998) attribute that loyalty to supportive principal behavior that encourages collegial faculty engagement. As professional learning communities are developed, principals redefined their roles and abilities to provide assistance to nurture a climate in which innovative professional activity is supported and encouraged (Sergivoanni, 1993).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study investigated the role of an elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities. The self-ethnographic case study focused on the actions of principals as professional learning communities are implemented in their schools. Ethnography is a method of studying and learning about a person or group of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Typically, ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. Rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects, the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore the purpose of this study was to investigate the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities. As stated previously in Chapter One, a professional learning community exists when a group of people commit themselves to continual learning and to support others in continual learning. Participants learn from each other, with each other and for each other. They share the knowledge that is gained, the excitement and challenges that come with learning difficult materials and the benefits their learning produces.

Much of the current literature on professional learning communities extolled the importance of school faculties working collegially to increase successful results for students. Chapter Two reviewed the literature from the perspective of defining the characteristics of schools operating as a collaborative community of professional learners. In addition, and of obvious importance, the gains for faculties and students when

schools engage as communities of inquiry and improvement were articulated. Included in the review of literature from Chapter Two involved: (1) a discussion of leadership styles and theories, (2) a investigation of school structure and culture, and (3) the development of professional learning communities.

This chapter presents an overview of the method in which the research is conducted. A discussion of the following five sections is included: (1) research questions, (2) research design, (3) participant selection and profiles, (4) data collection methods, and (5) data analysis/reporting.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is what is the role of the elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities?

Other questions answered by this study are:

- How do elementary principals use professional learning communities to facilitate school improvement?
- Do elementary principals use the structure and culture to develop the professional learning communities?
- What process did the elementary principals use to transform their schools into a professional learning community?

These questions have been developed from the research of professional learning communities and the role of leadership in the process. Since there is little empirical research on the role of principals in the development of professional learning communities, these qualitative questions describe what information is available and what is left to be determined.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to examine the role of a Georgia elementary principal in the development of professional learning communities. This methodology allowed for an in-depth investigation into the role of principals in developing professional learning communities. Also, the research allowed for a greater understanding of the role of principals in the implementation of professional learning communities. Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena (Meloy, 2002). Examples of qualitative methods are action research, case study research and ethnography (Meloy, 2002). Qualitative data sources include observation and participant observation (fieldwork), interviews and questionnaires, documents and texts, and the researcher's impressions and reactions (Meloy, 2002).

The purpose of this study (to determine the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities), the overarching research question ("what is the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities?"), and the lack of empirical research on the role of leadership in developing and implementing professional learning communities contributed to choosing this method of research. There will be two participants in this study. Based on the previously stated information presented, the best research methodology to use for this study is qualitative methodology. This researcher wished to determine "how", not "how much".

One of the major reasons for doing qualitative research is to become more experienced with the phenomenon in which you are interested (Trochim, 2000).

Qualitative research certainly excels at generating information that is very detailed. Of course, there are quantitative studies that are detailed also in that they involve collecting lots of numeric data (Trochim, 2000). In this study, the researcher used in-depth interviews to uncover information from the perspectives of elementary principals. In-depth interviews included an individual interview of the participant. The data can be recorded in a wide variety of ways including stenography, audio recording, video recording or written notes (Meloy, 2002). In interviews, it is assumed that there is a questioner and one or more interviewees (Meloy, 2002). The purpose of the interview is to probe the ideas of the interviewees about the phenomenon of interest (Trochim, 2000).

Participant Selection and Profiles

The participants in the study were the principals who have or are currently serving as principal of an elementary school in Central Savannah River area of Georgia since the implementation of professional learning communities. Because this is a self-ethnographic study, the researcher also served as a participant. The data was obtained from an interview completed by the participant designed to determine the role of principals in developing professional learning communities. The researcher gave his perspective of each response as the current principal of the school. The participant is the best individual to answer the research questions because he has the experience in the role of principal of the school researched. Because of the previous statement, no other participants were considered for this study.

Each principal was asked to complete the demographic survey instrument, to provide information on the number of years of experience and length of service they have at their present school. A biographical portraiture was created of the participant and

researcher involved in the study. Information provided from the portraiture included educational background, work experiences, and years of administrative experience of the principal. Additional information to be gathered included descriptions of the geographic area, the socioeconomic status of the students, and student achievement data of the school.

Key demographic information is ascertained to create a portraiture of the elementary school. Descriptions of the geographic area and the students included socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and location (rural). Relative to NCLB, the educational status of each school was discussed as well. Information such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status or any school wide academic awards was used to provide more detailed information about the school. In reference to academic performance data, Criterion Referenced Competency Test data was used to compare student achievement before and after implementation of professional learning communities.

Data Collection Methods

The data was collected using in-depth interview questions conducted by the researcher. The questions will be designed to ascertain meaning of role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities. The interview questions and the demographic survey was developed from information found in the review of literature discussed in Chapter Two, designed to answer the overarching research question and the three sub-questions. The demographic survey instrument was sent prior to the interview process, which assisted in the creation of a biographical portraiture of the participant.

This researcher used a mechanical recording device to document the answers of the participant, providing a more structured analysis of the data. Permission for the research will be obtained from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by submitting the required Human Subjects Protocol Request and securing consent for scheduled interviews from the participant.

The data was collected using interviews. The interviews will be conducted face to face. During the interview, notes will be taken to provide the researcher an opportunity to obtain information with as much accuracy as possible while concentrating on the participant. Follow up questions were not asked during the interview, but were available if necessary. Some of the semi-structured follow up questions that may be asked of the participant are as follows:

- As principal, do you view yourself as the instructional leader of your school? If yes, what examples can you discuss to demonstrate your instructional leadership?
- How would describe the culture and structure of your school from an instructional standpoint?
- How effective do you feel the professional learning communities are in your school? Explain your view.

The use of open-ended interview questions will allow the participant to fully explain his view regarding the development of professional learning communities in a comprehensive manner.

Data Analysis/Data Reporting

Because of the in-depth analysis required to conduct this type of study, the sample size created an intensive study of the participant. The interviews were transcribed

precisely to maintain accuracy of the data. The responses were first be recorded to attain the literal words of the participant and assembled according to the literature and research questions. To maintain the veracity of the interview process, information may be excluded from analysis at the request of the participant.

Summary

This study attempted to determine the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities. A qualitative methodology was used to conduct this study. The participant for the study was the former principal of an elementary school. After permission from the University IRB and selected participant, the participant was issued a demographic survey. Interviews were held to include interview questions in a face-to-face format. The interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed. Follow up questions were not asked of the participant because of the clarity of responses and accuracy of answers. The underlying principle of the research was to promote a more clear understanding of the role of elementary principals in developing professional learning communities.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the study. Responses from the demographic questionnaire are made available through text and tables. The examination of the role elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities is presented in the chapter through the participant of this study and the analysis of each response by the researcher. Greater understanding of the participant is determined through a detailed presentation of professional and personal profiles of the participant, and then the response of the participant are analyzed. The analysis is a presentation of how responses relate to the overarching research question, “What is the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities (PLCs)?” and the following three sub-questions:

- How do elementary principals use professional learning communities to facilitate school improvement?
- Do elementary principals use the structure and culture to develop the professional learning communities?
- What process did the elementary principals use to transform their schools into a professional learning community?

The participant in the study is the former principal of an elementary school where the researcher currently serves as principal. The participant currently serves as Assistant Superintendent in the same school district as the researcher. Because of the proximity of the participant, the interview was held face to face. During the interview there were no

interruptions and the session lasted about an hour. Because of the rapport previously established between the participant and the researcher, the interview evolved from being a question and answer session to become more conversational.

Participant's Demographic Profile

The participant completed a demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. Because the research is a self-ethnographic study, the researcher completed the demographic questionnaire as well. The participant of this study is over 60 and the researcher is between the ages of 30-39. The immediate family structure of the participants includes the following: both the participant and the researcher are married. The participant has no children while the researcher has three children. The participant came from a family with married parents and researcher from a single-parent family. The participant was reared with both parents and the researcher was reared with only the mother. The level of education achieved by the researcher's parent was an Associates degree and the recorded level of education completed by the participant's parents was high school. A limitation of the demographic questionnaire was that it did not list any educational attainment choice less than high school. The participant and the researcher considered their family class while growing up to be lower class. Both the participant and the researcher were reared in a rural community. Tables 1-9 represents frequency distributions of participant's and researcher's age, marital status, number of children, parental marital status, rearing parent(s), highest educational level of male parental figure, highest educational level of female parental figure, social class while growing up, and the type of community reared in as a youth.

Table 1
Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Age (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Age	Number
	29 or less	0
	30-39	1
	40-49	0
	50-59	0
	60 or over	1

Table 2
Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Marital Status (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Marital Status	Number
	Single	0
	Married	2
	Separated	0
	Divorced	0
	Widowed	0

Table 3
Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Number of Children (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Number of Children	Number
	1-2	0
	3-4	1
	Over 4	0
	No Children	1

Table 4
Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Parents' Marital Status_(N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Parents' Marital Status	Number
	Single	1
	Married	1
	Separated	0
	Divorced	0
	Widowed	0

Table 5
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Rearing Parents (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Rearing Parents	Number
	Mother and Father	1
	Mother	1
	Father	0
	Other	0

Table 6
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Educational Level of the Male Parental Figure (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Educational Level of Male Parental Figure	Number
	High School	2
	Associate	0
	Bachelors	0
	Masters	0
	Doctorate	0

Table 7
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Educational Level of the Female Parental Figure (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Educational Level of Female Parental Figure	Number
	High School	1
	Associate	1
	Bachelors	0
	Masters	0
	Doctorate	0

Table 8
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Family Class (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Family Class	Number
	Upper	0
	Upper middle	0
	Middle	0
	Lower	2

Table 9
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Community Type (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Community Type	Number
Urban		0
Suburban		0
Rural		2

Educationally, both the participant and the researcher hold an Education Specialist (Ed. S.) degree. At the undergraduate level, the participant graduated from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) while the researcher graduated from a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Both the participant and the researcher began college approximately at the age of eighteen. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, the area of study for both the participant and the researcher was education. The participant received a Masters degree from an HBCU and a Specialist degree from a PWI. The researcher received both Masters and Specialist degrees from PWIs. The participant has more than 25 years of school administrative experience while the researcher has 10 to 15 years. Both the participant and researcher have worked at 3 to 4 schools. The participant and researcher have been in their current positions 1 to 2 years. Prior to becoming principals, the participant and researcher both served as assistant principals. Table 10-21 presents frequency distributions of participants' highest level of education, type of undergraduate institution attended, area of undergraduate study, type of masters institution attended, area of masters study, type of specialist institution attended, area of specialist study, traditional or non-traditional undergraduate student status, years of school administration education experience, number of schools worked at, years of experience in current position, and position held prior to the principalship.

Table 10
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Highest Education Level_(N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Highest Education Level	Number
	Ph.D.	0
	Ed.D.	0
	Ed.S.	2
	Masters	0

Table 11
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Undergraduate School Type (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Undergraduate School Type	Number
	Historically Black Institution (Public)	0
	Historically Black Institution (Private)	1
	Predominately White Institution (Public)	1
	Predominately White Institution (Private)	0

Table 12
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Undergraduate Major (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Undergraduate Major	Number
	Education	2
	Technology	0
	Business	0
	Other	0

Table 13
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Masters School Type (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Masters School Type	Number
	Historically Black Institution (Public)	1
	Historically Black Institution (Private)	0
	Predominately White Institution (Public)	1
	Predominately White Institution (Private)	0

Table 14
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Masters Major (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Masters Major	Number
Education		2
Technology		0
Business		0
Other		0

Table 15
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Specialist School Type_(N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Specialist School Type	Number
Historically Black Institution (Public)		0
Historically Black Institution (Private)		0
Predominately White Institution (Public)		2
Predominately White Institution (Private)		0

Table 16
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Specialist Major (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Specialist Major	Number
Education		2
Technology		0
Business		0
Other		0

Table 17
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Traditional or Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student Status (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Traditional or Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student	Number	Status
Traditional		2	
Non-Traditional		0	

Table 18
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Years of School Administration Experience (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Years of School Administration Experience	Number
	Less than 10 years	0
	10-15 years	1
	15-20 years	0
	20-25 years	0
	25 or more years	1

Table 19
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Number of Schools Worked (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Number of Schools Worked	Number
	1-2	0
	3-4	2
	5-6	0
	More than 6	0

Table 20
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Years in Current Position_(N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Years in Current position	Number
	1-3	2
	3-6	0
	6-9	0
	More than 9	0

Table 21
 Frequency Distribution of Participant and Researcher by Positions Held Prior to the Principalship (N=2)

Demographic Variable:	Positions Held Prior to Principalship	Number
	Assistant Principal	2
	Central Office	0
	Counselor	0
	Teacher	0
	Other	0

Community Demographic Profile

Burke County is located in East Central Georgia, about twenty-five miles south of the metropolitan Augusta area. In terms of landmass, it is the largest county east of the Mississippi River. Waynesboro, the county seat is the largest town in Burke County.

Agriculture is the most important part of the total economy of Burke County. It continues to be the county's major source of employment. In Georgia, Burke County is ranked tenth in total lands reserved for farming and third in harvested cropland acres. Burke County continues to be ranked in the top ten in cotton, soybean, oat, rye, and wheat production.

Several new industries are making an impact on the county's economy. Two major industrial companies, Purification Solutions and Galaxy, recently joined the list of industries operating in Burke County. We also have Augusta Technical College, Waynesboro Campus that is able to provide training for our local industry as well as serve the educational needs of many Burke County residents.

According to the 2004 estimated census report, Burke County's population was 22,935. When disaggregated by race, the population percentages of the county are Non-Hispanic White (46.6%), Non-Hispanic Black (51%), and Non-Hispanic Asian, Hispanic, and other (3.4%).

The 2004 estimated census revealed that the median per capita income in Burke County was \$13,136.00. Burke County also has an unemployment rate of 8.1% and dropout rate of 35%. Approximately twenty-nine percent of the population of Burke County lives at or below the poverty level. When disaggregated by race, 42% of Blacks in Burke County compared with 14% of Whites.

School Demographic Profile

Blakeney Elementary (BES) is a Grade 3 through 5 school with a current enrollment of eight hundred two students. According to the numbers released in the *2005-2006 Georgia Public School Report Card*, about 85% of the students at Blakeney Elementary qualified for free or reduced lunch. Over fifty percent of the students come from families who receive financial assistance from the government. About seventy percent of these students are African-American and about thirty percent are Caucasian – American. The school has 17 third grade classrooms, 15 fourth grade classrooms and 18 fifth grade classrooms. Average class size is 16 in third grade, 17 in fourth grade, and 17 in fifth grade. Sixty-one percent of the teachers have a certificate level of Master's degree or higher. Each teacher in third grade has a full time paraprofessional. Currently, there are four paraprofessional tutors assigned to grades four and five to work with students each day.

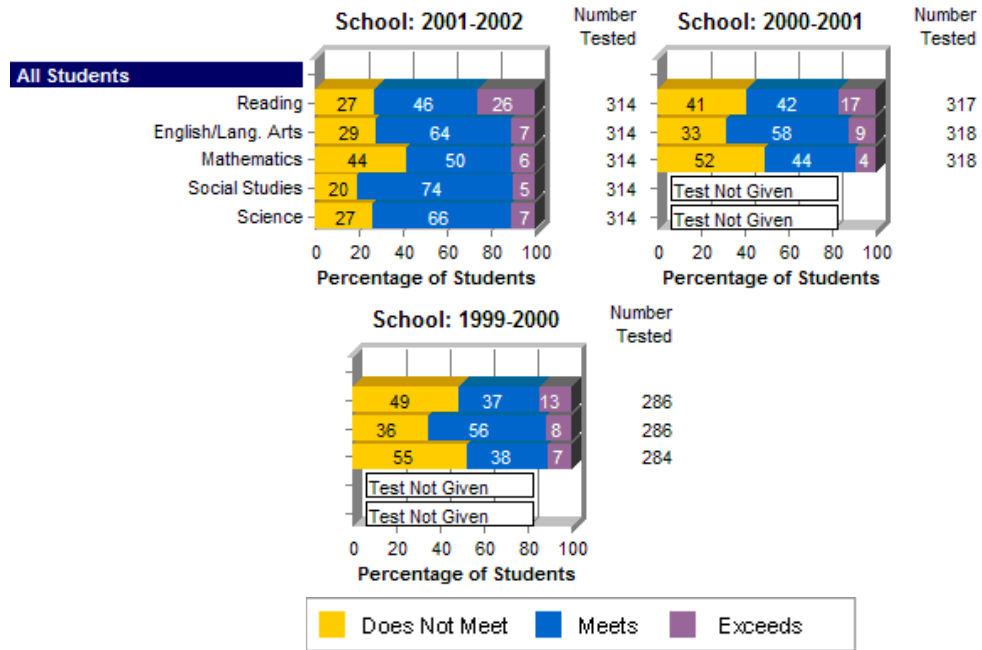
As for certified personnel, Blakeney Elementary has a principal, two assistant principals, and an instructional coordinator. BES has two full time guidance counselors, two physical education teachers, a music teacher, an art teacher, a media specialist, a technology specialist, five special education teachers, a school nurse, and a Title I parent resource coordinator. BES also has a speech/language pathologist, a discovery program teacher of gifted and talented students, and a part time math tutor for at-risk fifth grade students. There are additional paraprofessionals assigned to each special education, art, and physical education classes, as well as the computer lab. Of the certified employees, fifty-two percent hold a Master's or Specialist's degree at the end of the 2005-2006

school year. *The 2005-2006 Georgia Public School Report Card* stated that the teachers at Blakeney Elementary had an average of 12.58 years of teaching experience.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were implemented at Blakeney Elementary (BES) during the 2000-2001 school year. At the beginning of the 1996-97 school year, BES developed a school wide Title I plan because of the low socioeconomic status of many of the parents whose children were enrolled. A plan was developed that very year and implemented at the beginning of the 1997-98 school year. The plan was developed based on the results of a comprehensive needs assessment designed to provide services and programs to meet the needs of out students.

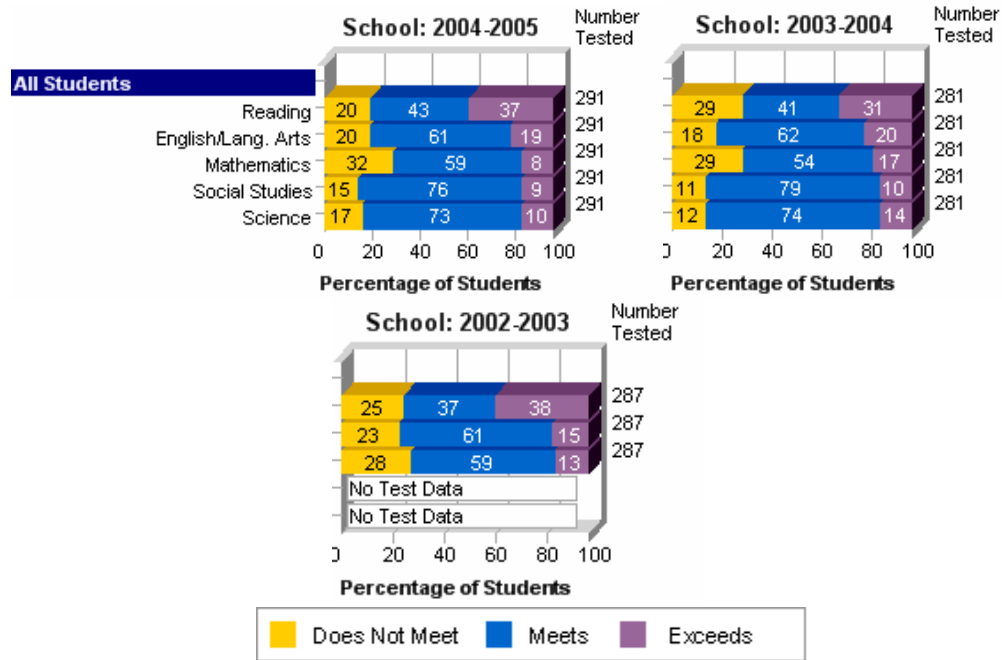
Prior to that year, BES had been on the Title I Needs Improvement List for the previous year. The Title I Needs Improvement List is based primarily on the standardized test scores, as outlined by Georgia A+ Reform Act of 2000 and federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. For Title I elementary schools in the State of Georgia, performance accountability was determined by fourth grade Reading and Mathematics scores on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). Results from the 2002 Georgia Office of Educational Accountability K-12 Public School Report Card (2002) demonstrated in Table 22 show significant improvement in tests scores from the year prior to PLC implementation compared to the following two years.

Table 22 4th Grade Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT)
 Percentage of Students at Each Performance Level: All Students 1999-2000 to 2001-2002



More recent test data shown in Table 23 also reflects an upward trend in academic improvement. Although there may be other variables that led to such improvement in test data, such as improved teacher quality and increased parental involvement, the implementation of PLCs have to be included as a possible factor as well.

Table 23 4th Grade Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT)
 Percentage of Students at Each Performance Level: All Students 2002-2003 to 2004-2005



Professional and Personal Profile

The following pseudonym will be used to identify the participant throughout the remainder of the study: William.

Participant-William

William is currently an Assistant Superintendent in the Burke County School District. He has served in this role for one year. Prior to his current position, William served as Principal of Blakeney Elementary for twenty-seven years.

William grew up in Burke County and has been employed in the Burke County School system for his entire forty-year educational career except one year in another district as an Assistant Principal. When asked about spending almost his entire career in one school district, he said, “Burke County is my home and I wanted to give back to it as much as I can. I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time. Sometimes that’s

more important than anything else.” William has seen several programs come and go throughout his career. However for him, implementing professional learning communities seemed the most difficult for him to embrace. When asked to elaborate, William explained, saying “I became an Assistant Principal in 1976 and a Principal in 1977. The administrators I learned from were very autonomous. They didn’t believe in collaboration and shared decision-making. When a decision had to be made, they made it and that was the end. Also, teachers did not want to be involved in the process of making decisions as well. They wanted to be left alone to teach. Teachers felt their planning time was theirs and they did not want to share it. So needless to say, PLCs was not an easy process for me to embrace.”

William stated that he knew for Blakeney Elementary to improve the academic performance of students, he had to involve more stakeholders in the process. Many of the veteran teachers that were instrumental in the school’s success academically were retiring or promoted to administrative positions. As younger, less experienced teachers were hired to replace the vacant positions, the professional quality William had become accustomed to slowly eroded. During the interview, William said several times that “my new and beginning teachers needed help, but they did not know it.”

William also realized his veteran teachers needed help as well. Children were beginning school less prepared and with more problems than in the past. Technology was not only a challenge for many “old school” teachers to embrace, it was also the competition as it began to become an addiction for many students. “Many quality veterans were getting increasingly frustrated with what they saw as a move from the

basics. Addition and subtraction using pencil and paper was being replaced by computers. In other words, they needed help too.”

At the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year, School Improvement Team at Blakeney Elementary, with the permission and endorsement of William, began searching for strategies to take the strengths of all faculty and staff members and used them to improve the academic performance of students. The team was composed of teachers from each grade level, a special education teacher, and the media specialist. The research of Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker was just becoming known as a method to incorporate the skills and talents of the organization collectively to improve the desired outcome, which for Blakeney Elementary was improving student academic achievement. One of the team members purchased a book entitled *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker. William said, “The team knew that this was the way to go, but I came along slowly. Remember I am old school. But I knew we had to do something, why not this.”

William used the School Improvement Team to present this process to the teachers, many of who would be reluctant to participate. The members of the team were respected in the building for being strong educators as well as team players. “ I knew if it came from me, especially that I wasn’t completely sold myself, it would not work.” The School Improvement Team became the umbrella professional learning community and served as the example for other PLCs throughout the school to emulate.

Research Question Analysis

Sub-Question 1: How do elementary principals use professional learning communities to facilitate school improvement?

This research question was answered by the Participant based on what has been experienced as Principal at Blakeney Elementary School. The Participant also reflected on his past experiences to answer this and subsequent questions. Two ideas became apparent very quickly, “focus on the what and how and not on the when and where”.

“One of the most complicated areas of leadership is the skill required to implement change”, said William. “The need for change often comes about because of a crisis or an unresolved issue. In education, major change may be caused by legislative act, such as *House Bill 1187* or the *No Child Left Behind Act*. While change is not always easy, it is inevitable. The Principal must communicate the reason for change, why it is important, and how it will improve the school.”

Leadership was the key component that William repeated in his response. “Leaders must first attempt to develop consensus. The first step should be to determine who inside the organization will likely embrace and work for the change and who in the organization that will resist the change, either because they do not believe in the possibility for success or they just generally do not like change. I always select those who support change to help with the transformation. The School Improvement Team was an example. Change resisters usually adapt to remain a member of the team or leave.”

Change is prevalent throughout schools as they struggle to adjust their thinking and actions. William stated very clearly that “the job of every leader should be to minimize the negative impact of change. Communication is one of the most important

components of all change initiatives.” He also believes that “leaders must effectively explain the rationale for change and the method for implementation. If you adopt these principles, you will go a long way towards making your change initiatives successful. I used the leadership on my School Improvement Team or Professional Learning Community to create a climate conducive to change. Empowering teachers was key in the development of professional learning communities at Blakeney Elementary.”

Researcher’s Response

Perhaps most importantly, Principals have begun viewing their schools as learning communities, for faculty as well as students. This requires casting school improvement in terms of theories to be tested rather than answers to be handed out, attacking the barriers to collaboration, and making decisions democratically rather than bureaucratically. When the spirit of inquiry fills the daily routine, schools are on their way to becoming true learning organizations.

As the current principal of Blakeney Elementary, professional learning communities are the information highways needed to share information regarding instructional practices. There is a continuous flow of information between PLCs on each grade level and the School Improvement Team. Each PLC has a member that serves on the School Improvement Team, eliminating a possible disconnect of information. Also, because I cannot attend all PLC meetings, I gain first hand knowledge of the valuable professional development activities occurring at my school. In the past, the School Improvement Team was a committee that kept the same members year after year. Team members are now on a two-year staggered rotation, meaning the team gains and loses

members each year. New leaders are developed as a result without losing the focus of the team, which is improving academic achievement for all students.

Professional learning communities are the primary method of professional development for our faculty and staff. I am a believer in using the talent you already possess rather than always pursuing outside sources. Book studies and analyzing student work according to standards allow teachers to facilitate their personal and professional growth. As professional learning communities continue to develop at Blakeney Elementary, the goal of improving student achievement will be a concept everyone can and will embrace.

Sub-Question 2: Do elementary principals use the structure and culture to develop the professional learning communities?

The answer to this question centers around the development of Participant's vision of the school and what is needed to implement necessary change. According to William, "A vision must be communicated, shared, and understood by all within the school to ensure its success. Principals must take the lead in the development of a vision that keeps the school focused on student achievement and school improvement. Principals must not only promote the creation of a vision for their schools, but also enhance their own vision that promotes their professional development."

The structure of the school played a significant role in the development of professional learning communities. "The master schedule had to be modified in order to allow for common planning time for teachers. Moving teachers from one classroom to another to allow for more collaboration was done as well. That was not easy, but very necessary."

As stated by William, vision alone does not ensure future success. “Planning and implementation of well-developed strategies for improving the school structure must be used to encourage a vision to make change possible for future success. Leaders that have already changed to new ways of thinking often do not understand the time needed for others to do the same. I needed more time.” William also believes that all principals must have the opportunity to examine their current ideas, develop a rationale for implementing change, and entertain new concepts and ideas that promote school improvement.

William believes “a growing number of educators have focused their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching. In place of the typical practices that isolate teachers from one another, collaboration encourages teachers and principals to cooperate for school improvement. We began to encourage frequent teacher interaction with respect to teaching and problems, frequent observation of teachers, joint planning and preparation, and support.” William then stated his transformed views of an effective school that incorporates professional learning communities (Interview July 16, 2007),

Good schools empower teachers to contribute in the decision making process. They encourage teachers to promote their professional development, increasing collaboration and decreasing negative thoughts from their peers. Forming smaller study and planning teams or collecting data that challenge assumptions teachers have held on to for years can ensure that change can and will occur if done collaboratively. Above all, as a principal, I must create an atmosphere that supports change. This can be done by speaking about the vision and believe in it; by appreciating successes and understanding failures that will occur; and by remaining

confident despite the problems that could make change more difficult.

Involving teachers also helps in this process as well. It is difficult to complain about something you helped decide to do.

Researcher's Response

The structure and culture of Blakeney Elementary continues to be developed to enable all stakeholders to communicate and collaborate effectively. Teachers have been utilizing common planning to strengthen their instruction. We recently added pieces to the puzzle of raising the bar of student achievement. During PLC meetings, teachers are also developing common assessments in order to evaluate student progress according to standards. Not only do PLCs meet during their common planning time each day, they have additional meeting time on Wednesday afternoons. Wednesdays are extended day for 45 minutes to allow for grade level planning and vertical planning.

School culture has improved tremendously as professional learning communities are continuously developed. "The way we do things around here" always involve what is best for students first. Blakeney Elementary is a relatively large elementary school, with over 800 students and 125 faculty and staff members. To change school culture at all would take an effort from more than just the Principal. It takes a vision that all can embrace. The vision established here at Blakeney Elementary did not just come from me. It was developed by the School Improvement Team and embraced by all.

Sub-Question 3: What process did the elementary principals use to transform their schools into a professional learning community?

William began talking about the development of professional learning communities depending upon the current state of school, the effects of change on staff

members and students, the structural and organizational factors of the schools, and the relationship of community to other improvement activities.

“A growing number of principals are focusing their efforts on improving the work environment of teaching”, said William. “I truly believe that changing a school into a professional learning community can be done only with the support of the principal and the collective support of the entire faculty and staff.” He then said, “The principal of a school whose faculty and staff has transformed into a professional learning community seems a place to start for understanding what these learning communities are and how the principal promotes a supportive relationship with teachers to share leadership and decision making. The idea that teachers must be leaders and learners for students to learn seem simple, but this has often not been schools has encouraged their teachers to be.” To describe the process more clearly, William said the following: (Interview July 16, 2007),

Developing a professional learning community for schools requires a new form of professional learning. The professional learning not only must affect the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individual teachers, administrators, and other school employees, but it also must change the cultures and structures of the schools in which those people work.

Teachers have often considered professional learning days a waste of time because stale presentations that have been used to endorse new ideas that belong to someone else without input from teachers and often resulted in no follow through or support to implement the programs. Now they do not. Teachers were almost never given an opportunity to create their own meaning and understanding about the new program, much less discuss

with their peers about how the programs and strategies discussed will affect student learning and their own beliefs about improving student academic achievement. Now they are.

Researcher's Response

Professional learning communities at Blakeney Elementary have truly evolved into the primary professional development for all faculty and staff. Collaboration and shared decision making allows greater support for changes at the school. The process of transforming Blakeney Elementary into a professional learning community could not have occurred without the establishment of a strong leadership team. That role was and is still held by the School Improvement Team. More opportunities exist for faculty members to be involved because the team members change every two years.

Every faculty and staff member at Blakeney Elementary is a member of a professional learning community. There is collaboration even among the custodians and lunchroom workers, office personnel and the school nurse. At Blakeney Elementary, professional learning communities is not a program designed to create learning for faculties, but a process to facilitate professional development for all stakeholders.

Summary

The findings summarized a combined 40 years of administrative experience, in addition to the challenges and rewards of developing professional learning communities. Although there were various similarities among the Principals that led the development and continuous improvement of professional learning communities (PLCs) at Blakeney Elementary, their individual differences in leadership style, years of administrative

experience, and life histories provided a some contrast in the way PLCs are being led currently in comparison to when first implemented.

Emerging themes that came from the interview are the following: the importance of securing teacher support, providing time and opportunities for collaboration, and the understanding that the Principal must be involved in order for PLCs to be developed. These themes were mentioned consistently in the responses from the Participant as well as the Researcher.

If strong results such as the above are linked to all stakeholders working in professional learning communities, all members of the organization should embrace this concept. A change in thinking is needed by all stakeholders regarding the role of teacher in making decisions and improving instructional practices. Many in the public believe that the only legitimate use of teachers' time is lecturing in front of the class or working directly with students. Teachers also need the opportunity to use their time planning, collaborating with peers, working with students, conducting peer observations, and engaging in meaningful professional learning.

William realizes, although reluctantly in the beginning, that “teachers must take ownership of the own professional development.” Even after turning the reigns of his school over to a new instructional leader, William understands the role of the principal in the development of professional learning communities. As William said quite profoundly, “You have to be the leader and use your leadership to be involved.”

As the current Principal, I could not agree more. I have to be an active participant of any change initiative. To not be sends a message that I either do not believe in the

change fully or that I do not have to be involved. In other words, I must either be a part of the solution or deal with the problems.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief summary of the study. Relevant conclusions, implications for further study, and recommendation for further study by the researcher are included in this chapter as well.

Summary

The motivation for this study came from the researcher's (1) past experiences and history at Blakeney Elementary, (2) interest in the development of effective professional learning communities, and (3) understanding of the role of the Principal as the lead learner in schools. The literature was reviewed to explain what professional learning communities are and what leadership is need for development.

In order to determine the role of elementary principals in developing professional learning communities, a self-ethnographic, qualitative methodology was employed. The study is considered self-ethnographic because the researcher's role in the study. The participant for this study is the former Principal of the school where the researcher current serves in that role. Prior to the face to face interview, the participant and researcher completed a demographic questionnaire and the participant also completed a consent letter. A consent letter was also sent to the Superintendent of Schools to receive permission to use the name of Blakeney Elementary in the study.

Following the demographic questionnaire and the letters of consent, the interview was conducted for approximately one hour. During the interview, a recording device was used to ensure accuracy of responses. However, the participant did not want transcripts

published for the study. Results from the demographic questionnaire were graphed to document responses and show comparison between the participant and researcher.

Analysis of Research Findings

Through reviewing the demographic questionnaire and the career histories of the participant and the researcher, there are several similarities and differences. Both have served as Principal of Blakeney Elementary and are natives of Burke County. They also come from rural backgrounds and entered education and leadership through the traditional route. However, the preparation from undergraduate and Master's programs provide a contrast of expertise. Family structure and professional experience also demonstrates differences between the participant and the researcher.

As it relates to the development of professional learning communities at Blakeney Elementary, only one major difference existed between the participant and the researcher. The participant was hesitant in the beginning when professional learning communities were implemented, which could be categorized as more of a transactional leader. The researcher embraced the use of professional learning communities prior to becoming Principal, making his leadership style more transformational. However, they both believe in utilizing the strengths and talents of all stakeholders to promote professional development, encouraging self-reflection, providing opportunities to receive input from faculty and staff members, and making decisions that will improve student achievement.

Discussion of Research Findings

The findings of the study have several similarities with research presented in Chapter Two, but there are also stark differences and omissions. The self-ethnographic, qualitative methodology that involves in-depth interviewing provided an opportunity to

explain the role of elementary principal in developing professional learning communities from current practitioners. Using this methodology with the participants, who possess expertise and experience, helped get real answers of the role of elementary principals and how they should be involved in the promotion of professional learning communities in their schools.

In education today, the term professional learning community has been used more often. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community stakeholders into the school to supplement the curriculum and provide real-world learning tasks for students; or connecting students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously to learning.

This research focuses on what Dufour (2002) labeled the professional learning community, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously collaborate to share learning and then share in the decision making process that enhances school improvement. The goal is to improve the effectiveness of all stakeholders so that student achievement increases. As an organizational structure, the professional learning community is seen as an effective professional learning approach and a critical component for school improvement. As William said during the interview, “People at all levels of the educational process are concerned about school improvement - state department personnel, RESAs (Regional Educational Service Agencies), district-level administrators, teachers, parents and local community leaders - should find this research of interest.”

A professional learning community exists when a group of people commit themselves to continual learning and to support others in continual learning. A

professional learning community facilitates ongoing, collective thoughts about teaching and learning. It involves everyone in creditable learning experiences. The participants in professional learning communities learn from each other, with each other and for each other. They share the knowledge that comes from learning new concepts, the joy that comes with learning difficult materials and the benefits their learning allows.

An effective professional learning community provides teachers and administrators with the kinds of learning experiences they want to provide for all students. It models collaboration and communication needed to gain useful knowledge, provides a sense of understanding and self-confidence for the teachers and administrators as they face increasing challenges that comes with educating the students of today and the future. A professional learning community improves teacher productivity and produces increased student academic achievement. A professional learning community promotes and encourages change and makes it a realistic part of the evolution of schools.

Professional learning opportunities that have as its goal high levels of learning for all students, teachers, and administrators requires a form of professional development that is quite different from the workshop-driven approach. The most effective forms of professional learning occur in small study teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of improving instructional practices, collaborative lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called professional learning communities or learning communities, exist with the understanding that continuous improvement is a goal and experimentation must be supported to engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning.

Teams may be of various sizes but should serve a common purpose. For instance, the faculty as a whole may meet once or twice a month to reflect on its work, engage in professional learning, and assess continuous progress. In addition, some members of the faculty may serve on school improvement teams or committees that focus on the goals and methods of school wide improvement. While these teams make important improvements to school structure and culture, they do not substitute for the day-to-day professional dialogue that occurs focused on instructional practices that are essential for effective professional learning communities. Learning teams meet almost every day and concern themselves with effective methods to improve teaching and increase learning. Members of professional learning communities take collective responsibility for the learning of all students represented by team members. Members of learning teams, which consist of four to eight members, assist one another in analyzing student work using performance standards, planning more effectively, and solving the common problems that occur in the teaching profession.

The teams determine areas in which additional learning would be helpful. Reading articles in professional journals, attending workshops or courses that enhance instruction, or using educational consultants to support them in acquiring knowledge or techniques. In addition to the regular meetings, participants conduct peer observations and conduct other job-related responsibilities. Professional learning communities are reinforced when other support staff, district-level administrators, and school board members participate, and when communication is promoted between teams. Because of this common vision and purpose, problems of a lack of unity, miscommunication, and misunderstanding that typically foil school improvement efforts are eliminated.

Conclusions

The findings of the study indicate that elementary principals have a very significant role in the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). The transformation of schools using PLCs is not a new method of professional development, autonomous to Blakeney Elementary. Using professional learning communities to improve instructional practices and methods is occurring in schools in every state. It is clear that instructional leadership is a requirement of a developing community of professionals in which increased understanding of what is needed to improve instruction and learning. In the more successfully developing schools that implemented professional learning communities, there were persons available to provide mentorship and support to teachers. Individual teachers' problems with teaching and learning facilitated group discussion and problem solving sessions to continue the supportive process. This strategy enhanced the individual teacher's growth, improved teacher competency and reinforced the professional learning community's responsibility for improving teacher preparation.

The main issues here are that principals need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance; principals can look to others, either inside or outside the physical building, but must be certain that help is available to those in need. And in order for teachers to feel comfortable with asking for or receiving assistance individually, a culture in which instruction is viewed as a problem must not exist.

Principals should model the behaviors of a professional learning community, keeping with the vision of school and improving its culture. As Louis and Kruse (1995) observed, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living through communicated experience" (p. 215) and a professional

community is founded on a "process of communicating ideas, ideals, shared concerns, and interests" (p. 216). Thus, the autocratic leader who holds all the power, who is dominating, and who makes all decisions will not likely model participatory behaviors related to democratic practice.

Acquiring and applying new knowledge is an intellectual task and a high priority in a professional learning community. Louis and Kruse (1995) stated that leaders in the most successful schools actively supported a culture of inquiry through constant scanning and bringing in of new ideas and people to help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and to develop increased skills. Leaders championed the need for information and data so that staff engaged in discussions of "What is working and how do we know?" (p. 219). The leaders also supported and promoted intellectual collaboration by teachers as a means by which teachers gained and created new knowledge.

Principals in schools that have not implemented professional learning communities may not realize the necessity of creating opportunities that would gather faculty together in the promotion of a common objective or goal. The message for principals is that they must provide a vision and have personal involvement in cultivation of the school improvement process. Most importantly, as mentioned briefly earlier, the role of the principal is to provide meaningful ways for teachers to come together to focus on issues and work that concerns each of them.

Implications

This study has implications to all principals, elementary principals in particular, as well as the entire education community. The current popularity of site-based management and increased teacher autonomy regarding their professional development

encourages more understanding professional learning communities and the role of principals has become more important.

Change can be planned and implemented until a school decides what it stands for and where it is going (Barth, 1991). Individual personal visions being communicated begin the process of developing a shared vision, created with trust and mutual understanding. And a school must not only develop and communicate its vision but consider the use of its vision, making decisions consistent with the vision as evidence of the school's commitment to school improvement (Marzano, 2003). Professional development became a priority, and all available resources were used to promote that priority.

This study is important to all elementary principals implementing professional learning communities as a result of “real answers” given by the participant and the researcher. Elementary school principal wishing to implement or develop professional learning communities in your school cannot just change the daily schedule and create a vision statement. Teachers need continuous interaction to assimilate significant ideas, as well as support for examining and identifying new practices that can increase their effectiveness. Leaders must take personal action to make connections to research and promising practice outside the school or provide the external means for doing so for this to happen.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research include information to provide guidance in creating and developing professional learning communities. None of the literature provides an explicit step-by-step set of directions or procedures for creating professional

learning communities. There are few models and little clear information to guide the creation of professional learning communities. Although much discussion, thought, and reporting on the subject has taken place in the private sector, such experiences may or may not translate well to public schools. In the educational arena, researchers have spoken the lack of research-based procedures that contribute to the formulation and establishment of professional learning communities. It may be that this organizational process is still relatively new or too infrequent in schools to have a history and a base of empirical research. This strongly suggests a need for studies that address the question.

Additionally, this researcher recommends further investigation of the correlation between professional learning communities and student achievement. Blakeney Elementary made significant improvement in student academic achievement upon the implementation of professional learning communities. Further research is needed to determine if the improvements made at Blakeney Elementary could be contributed significantly to professional learning communities.

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APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

**DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN
DEVELOPMENT**

July 23, 2007

Dear Participant:

My name is Roderick Sams and I am doctoral graduate student at Georgia Southern University. This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data to determine the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities.

Participation in this research will involve the completion of a demographic questionnaire and a face-to-face interview. The interview will consist of four open-ended questions and five follow-up questions if necessary to clarify any responses. A mechanical recording device will be used during the interview to ensure accuracy of responses. Since the research is based on your experience in developing professional learning communities at a rural elementary school, there is minimal risk in this process. The time estimated for your commitment is one and one-half to two hours, which consist of: thirty minutes for the demographic questionnaire, one hour for semi-structured interview, and one-half hour for follow-up questions.

The findings of this study may assist elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities in their prospective schools. These findings may also provide greater incite into the value of professional learning communities as a tool to improve instructional practices and increase student achievement.

Participants will also have the right to ask questions and expect a response in return. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact the researcher named above or the faculty advisor using the contact information listed at the end of the informed consent. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-486-7758.

You are under no obligation to participate in this research and may end your participation at any time by notifying the researcher or failure to complete at return the questionnaire. As a participant, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer; there is no penalty for choosing not to participate.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. To give consent to participate in this research study, please sign your name and indicate the date.

You will be given a copy of this consent for your records.

Title of Project: Lessons from a Rural Georgia School on Developing Successful Professional Learning Communities.

Principal Investigator: Roderick D. Sams, 203 Crestridge Drive, Waynesboro, GA, 30830
706-554-7283
rdsams@bellsouth.net

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Meta Harris, Leadership, Technology, and Human Development,
P.O. Box 8131, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, 30560, 912-681-5307
myharris@georgiasouthern.edu

Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

SUPERINTINDENT INFORMED CONSENT

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

**DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN
DEVELOPMENT**

July 23, 2007

Dear Superintendent Bailey:

My name is Roderick Sams. I am a Doctoral Candidate at Georgia Southern University. This letter is to request your permission for Blakeney Elementary School to be mentioned in a study involving the role of elementary principals in the development of professional learning communities. If you agree to participate, please sign at the bottom of the page and place it in the envelope I have provided. Your signature will be considered permission to mention Blakeney Elementary in the study. Please understand that all data used regarding Blakeney Elementary will be accurate, meeting your standards as Superintendent as well as the Burke County Board of Education.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact the researcher named above at 706-554-2265 or email at rsams@burke.k12.ga.us. or the faculty advisor using the contact information listed at the end of the informed consent. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-486-7758.

You are under no obligation to allow participation in this research and may end the participation at any time by notifying the researcher or failure to complete at return the informed consent. To give consent to participate in this research study, please sign your name and indicate the date.

You will be given a copy of this consent for your records. Thank you in advance for allowing participation in this study.

Title of Project: Lessons from a Rural Georgia School on Developing Successful Professional Learning Communities.

Principal Investigator: Roderick D. Sams, 203 Crestridge Drive, Waynesboro, GA, 30830
706-554-7283
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Meta Harris, Leadership, Technology, and Human Development,
P.O. Box 8131, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, 30560, 912-681-5307
myharris@georgiasouthern.edu

Superintendent Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

LESSONS FROM A RURAL GEORGIA SCHOOL ON DEVELOPING
SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION A- PERSONAL INFORMATION

What is your age?

- A. 29 or less
- B. 30-39
- C. 40-49
- D. 50-59
- E. 60 or over

Highest Degree earned.

- A. Ph. D.
- B. Ed. D.
- C. Ed.S.
- D. Masters

Marital/Relationship Status

- A. Single/never married
- B. Married
- C. Separated
- D. Divorced
- E. Widowed

Number of Children

- A. 1-2
- B. 3-4
- C. Over 4
- D. No Children

SECTION B- EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION

Highest level of education

- A. Ph.D.
- B. Ed.D.
- C. Ed.S.
- D. Master's
- E. Bachelors

Type of undergraduate institution attended

- A. Historically Black Institution (Public)
- B. Historically Black Institution (Private)
- C. Predominantly White Institution (Public)
- D. Predominantly White Institution (Private)

Area of Study for Undergraduate Institution

- A. Education
- B. Business
- C. Technology
- D. Other _____

Type of Masters Institution attended

- A. Historically Black Institution (Public)
- B. Historically Black Institution (Private)
- C. Predominantly White Institution (Public)
- D. Predominantly White Institution (Private)

Area of Study for Master's institution

- A. Education
- B. Business
- C. Technology
- D. Other _____

Type of Specialist Institution attended

- A. Historically Black Institution (Public)
- B. Historically Black Institution (Private)
- C. Predominantly White Institution (Public)
- D. Predominantly White Institution (Private)

Area of Study for Specialist Institution

- A. Education
- B. Business
- C. Technology
- D. Other _____

Did you enter college directly after high school?

- A. Yes
- B. No

SECTION C- EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

How many years of school administration experience do you have?

- A. less than 10 years
- B. 10-15 years
- C. 15-20 years
- D. 20-25 years
- E. 25 or more

During your career, how many schools have you worked at?

- A. 1 to 2
- B. 3 to 4
- C. 4 to 5
- D. 5 to 6
- E. More than 6

How many years have you been in your current position?

- A. 1 to 3
- B. 3-6
- C. 6-9
- D. More than 9

What position did you hold before you were a principal?

- A. Assistant principal
- B. Central office
- C. Counselor
- D. Teacher
- E. Other _____

SECTION D- PARENT/FAMILY HISTORY

Parents' marital status

- A. Single/never married
- B. Married
- C. Separated
- D. Divorced
- E. Widowed

Who did you live with as a youth (ages 0-18)?

- A. Mother and Father
- B. Mother
- C. Father
- D. Other _____

Highest level of education of male parental figure

- A. High School
- B. Associates
- C. Bachelors
- D. Masters
- E. Doctorate

Highest level of education of female parental figure

- A. High School
- B. Associates
- C. Bachelors
- D. Masters
- E. Doctorate

In your opinion, what class was your family when you were a youth?

- A. Upper class
- B. Upper middle class
- C. Middle class
- D. Lower class

What kind of community were you reared in?

- A. Urban
- B. Rural
- C. Suburban

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. RESEARCH QUESTION: How do elementary principals use professional learning communities to facilitate school improvement?
 - As principal, do you view yourself as the instructional leader of your school? If yes, what examples can you discuss to demonstrate your instructional leadership?
2. RESEARCH QUESTION: Do elementary principals use the structure and culture to develop the professional learning communities?
 - How would describe the culture and structure of your school from an instructional standpoint?
3. RESEARCH QUESTION: What process did the elementary principals use to transform their schools into a professional learning community?
 - How effective do you feel the professional learning communities are in your school? Explain your view.

APPENDIX E
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-681-5465

Administrative Annex

P.O. Box 8005

Fax: 912-681-0719

Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Roderick Sams
203 Crestridge Drive
Waynesboro, GA-30830

CC: Dr. Meta Harris
P.O. Box-8131

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: July 6, 2007

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: H07242, and titled "Lessons From a Rural Georgia School on Developing Successful Professional Learning", it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol, you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



N. Scott Pierce
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs