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PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATORS IN SELECTED NEBRASKA SCHOOL DISTRICTS REGARDING THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN THEIR SCHOOLS

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PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATORS IN SELECTED NEBRASKA SCHOOL

DISTRICTS REGARDING THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

COMMUNITIES IN THEIR SCHOOLS

By

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The purpose of the multiple-site study was to explore educator's perceptions of the

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that had been operating in three school

districts using in-depth interviews. The goal of this research was to describe from the

educator's perspective what they perceived, thought and observed about the PLCs

functioning in their school building, and whether or not the PLCs had any noticeable

effect on professional development, school improvement efforts, and student

achievement in their building. Educators were also asked the question of why they

thought that PLCs were effective.

This multiple-site case study is important to Nebraska educators because many

school districts have initiated a variety of forms of PLCs in their school buildings or

districts. School districts that have implemented PLCs reported positive perceptions from

educators about increased opportunities for professional development and school

improvement in their districts.

This study involved three school districts in Nebraska that had been operating

PLC's for a minimum of three years. The researcher found that educators in all three

districts had positive perceptions about the effects of PLC's in the areas of professional

development, school improvement, and student achievement. While the perceptions of

educators indicated student achievement was likely improved through the use of PLC's,

there was no hard evidence to confirm those perceptions.

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my late father, Harris Fort Kiburz. My only regret throughout this entire process is that my first and foremost teacher did not get to see the completion of this work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, schools throughout the nation have initiated Professional Learning

Communities (PLCs) in their buildings. There are a variety of definitions of a

Professional Learning Community (PLC) depending on the author or creator of the model

that is examined. A broad definition of a PLC is what Astuto and colleagues (1993)

referred to as a, "professional community of learners," In a professional community of

learners, "the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share

learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of their actions is to enhance their

effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit" Hord (1997).

Reichstetter (2006) suggested that a PLC is,

made up of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued
improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision.
Facilitating this effort are:
- supportive leadership and structural conditions;
- collective challenging, questioning, and reflecting on team-designed lessons
  and instructional practices/experiences; and
- team decisions on essential learning outcomes and intervention/enrichment
  activities based on results of common formative student assessments.

Little (1990) reported that student achievement and teacher confidence were

raised by teamwork in schools. There was also more support given to novice teachers.

An "increased pool of ideas, materials and methods" was also documented.

Little information is known about the effects of PLCs in schools in the State of

Nebraska. The purposes of this study were to examine educator's perceptions of PLCs in

schools that have been operating PLCs for a minimum of three years, to discover how

PLCs were being utilized, and whether educators perceived positive or negative results in

professional development, school improvement, and student achievement as a result of PLCs. It was also the purpose of this study to examine educator's perceptions as to why they felt PLCs were effective if they had the perception that they were effective.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of educators in selected Nebraska school districts about the impact of PLCs in their schools. The purpose of the study was accomplished by interviewing teachers and administrators in selected Nebraska school districts about their perceptions of PLCs over a minimum of three years and how they perceived that PLCs had impacted professional development, school improvement and student achievement in their school districts. This study was a multi-site qualitative case study.

Research Questions

Five research questions guided the study. These five questions are:

1. How did selected Nebraska educators learn about PLCs?

2. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on professional development in their schools?

3. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on school improvement in their schools?

4. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on student achievement in their schools?

5. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators on why PLCs were or were not effective?

Assumptions

The first assumption of this study was that school districts in Nebraska have attempted to implement PLCs in their schools. Based on observations of the researcher at workshops, inservices, and statewide conferences, many schools have adopted the PLCs model, or at least were aware of what the process entails.

A second assumption was that schools in the State of Nebraska have used a variety of PLC models. They also implemented PLCs in a variety of ways. These observations are based on the fact that while PLCs have certain qualities that make them a PLC, there are many different ways in which they can be implemented and utilized.

A third assumption was that the implementation of PLCs had a positive impact on staff development and school improvement activities, as well as student achievement.

Delimitations

One delimitation of this study was that the school districts selected to participate in the study were restricted to those districts that had been operating a PLC in their buildings for a minimum of three years. A further delimitation was the researcher purposely selected schools based on recommendations of other educators and his advisor. This limited the number of potential schools to be selected to school districts that the researcher, his advisor and their colleagues were familiar with and met the requirement of operating a PLC for a minimum of three years.

A final delimitation to this study was that PLCs have different forms and school districts utilize different models. Two school districts in this study used a model of PLCs created by Rick DuFour. The remaining district used the model known as Whole-Faculty-Study-Groups (WFSGs) which was created by Carlene Murphy. The school

districts also had different meeting times for their PLCs. Some schools had early dismissals to allow for PLC time and others had late starts.

Methodology

The researcher selected three school districts that met the criteria for the study and approved them with his advisor. The researcher then contacted district officials at the three schools and gained permission to conduct research.

In March, 2010, the researcher then contacted district officials at the two urban districts in order to get recommendations for individual school buildings to contact for interviews. The researcher wanted to conduct interviews at an elementary school, a middle school, and high school in each urban district. The Director of Staff Development and Instructional Improvement for School District A was contacted in March, 2010, and recommended the elementary, middle, and high school at School District A. The Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education at School District B were contacted and recommended the elementary, middle and high school for School District B.

The Superintendent for School District C was contacted in the spring of 2010 and a date was set to conduct interviews of educators at the elementary, middle and secondary level in the spring of 2010. The six building principals recommended for the study in School Districts A and B were contacted in the spring of 2010 and dates were set to conduct interviews with educators and principals in those buildings.

The researcher selected and contacted the Director of Staff Development and Instructional Improvement at School District A to be interviewed as the District Administrator for School District A. She was selected based upon her knowledge and background with the PLC process at School District A. The former Director of School

Improvement at School District B was selected and contacted to arrange an interview.

He was selected as the District Administrator to be interviewed for School District B

because the researcher and his advisor knew that he had a significant role in bringing the

PLC process to School District B and would be the most familiar with how the process

was introduced to schools and how it was implemented.

The researcher requested that the building principals of School Districts A and B

select three educators from their buildings to participate in the interviews. The only

stipulation was that the educator had to have been teaching and participating in a PLC

group in that building for three years. The Superintendent of School District C was asked

and agreed to contact building principals and three teachers at each level (elementary,

middle, and high school) to be interviewed.

The researcher selected dates and times for interviews so that school would still

be in session for the selected schools. The researcher thought he would have difficulty

getting educators to return to school to participate in the study if they were on summer

vacation.

Limitations

The study was limited to 30 educators across three districts of different sizes.

One district was in a rural setting and had differences in their PLC. The model they

chose was different than that of the two urban districts and their enrollment created a

difference in their PLC structure. The difference was that they did not have grade level

team meetings which were more common in the urban districts. Where the urban

districts had teams of four or five teachers teaching the same grade or subject area in a

building, the rural district might only have two or three and often combined grade levels and buildings to form a PLC group.

Another limitation was that schools involved included high schools, middle schools and elementary schools. The perceptions and experiences of the educators in those different settings were likely to be quite different.

Significance of the Study

Few studies have been completed regarding the impact of PLCs on professional development, school improvement or student achievement. One of the problems encountered when studying PLCs was that their effectiveness, much like any school initiative, is tied to student achievement. When schools start an initiative that says it will improve student learning, student achievement results are going to be examined closely. There are many factors that are tied to student achievement and placing all the credit (or blame) on one initiative would not be wise. The cause and effect relationship between a school program and student achievement can be difficult to establish and PLCs are no exception to this difficulty.

This study will contribute to the body of research about PLCs in many ways. The study is significant because it examined the perceptions of educators regarding a relatively new model of professional development and school improvement. Since professional development and school improvement are so closely linked to instruction, any perceived improvement in instruction attributed to utilizing PLCs may be helpful to teachers and school administrators.

Another reason this study is significant is that not all schools have implemented, or are even aware of the concept of PLCs. A study showing that PLCs do indeed have a

positive impact on professional development, school improvement, teacher instruction and student learning based on educator's perceptions might entice more schools to adopt this practice.

The final reason this study is important is that the information on PLCs is limited in the State of Nebraska. Many educators and educational agencies in the State of Nebraska may use this information in their assessment and evaluation of PLCs. Utilizing PLCs in schools would definitely be a departure from the norm that currently exists in many Nebraska schools in regards to professional development and school improvement. State policy leaders might use the information to make adjustments to current practices.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The literature review examines the concepts of change, educational change and

school reform since establishing a PLC certainly entails all of those subjects. It will also

define what a PLC is and will examine the various models that have been utilized. The

review will also include the effects of PLCs on staff development and school

improvement and summarize some of the early research that has emerged about the

effectiveness of PLCs.

Change

As Machiavelli stated in the 1500's, it is a challenge to move people from their

comfortable and accustomed routines and behaviors. There are many theories that have

been advanced regarding the concept of change. The theories have tried to answer the

question of how successful change occurs.

Lewin (1951) proposed a three-step model to change. He viewed behavior as a

balance of forces that were pushing in opposite directions. One force pushes people in

the direction of the desired change while the restraining force inhibits change because it

pushes people in the opposite direction. By analyzing the opposing forces and applying

the three-step model, one can shift the balance of forces towards the desired change.

The first step in the model of changing behavior is to "unfreeze" the current

situation or condition. The driving forces of the change must be increased, the restraining

forces must be decreased, or a combination of both must occur.

The second step involves mobility. The system must move to a different level in the direction of the desired change. This is accomplished by persuading those affected by the change that the current situation is not good for them and encouraging them to examine problems from a different viewpoint.

The third step involves "refreezing." This occurs after the change has taken place. It is also known as sustainability. If this is not done, Lewin argues that the change will not last and people will revert back to their old way of doing things.

The shortcoming of this model is that while it seems rational, it does not take into account human feelings and experiences that can lead to the change having negative effects. People might meet the change with resistance or reduced enthusiasm.

Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) expanded on Lewin's Three-Step Change Theory. Their seven step theory examined the agent of change more than the process of change. The seven steps to the theory were:

1. diagnose the problem;
2. assess the motivation and capacity for change;
3. assess the resources and motivation of the change agent (this includes the change agent's commitment to change, power, and stamina;
4. choose progressive change objects (during this step, action plans are developed and strategies are established);
5. the role of the change agents should be selected and clearly understood by all parties so that expectations are clear;
6. maintain the change (communication, feedback, and group coordination are essential elements in this step of the change process);
7. gradually terminate from the helping relationship (the change agent should gradually withdraw from their role over time). This will occur when the change becomes part of the organizational culture. (Lippitt, Watson, & Westley, 1958)

In his book, *The Six Secrets of Change*, (Fullan, 2008, as cited in Reeves, 2009) identifies the six conditions that he thought needed to be present in an organization in order for change to be successful and sustained. These six conditions are: 1) Love Your

Employees; 2) Connect Peers with Purpose; 3) Capacity Building Prevails; 4) Learning is the Work; 5) Transparency Rules; 6) Systems Learn (p. 149).

Reaction to Change

People are going to react differently to change. To illustrate this, all one would have to do is look at the mood of our country in 2010 and the resulting mid-term elections in November of that year to see that clearly, people respond differently to change.

According to Reeves (2009), "Opposition to change is embedded deep in the human psyche." He goes on to state that, "Find a change—any change, no matter how essential—and you'll find opposition to it" (p. 9)

Deutschman (2007) came to the conclusion that the odds against change being successful, even when the change is literally a matter of life and death, such as an alcoholic quitting drinking, are nine to one. He noted that while people see change as a vital part of life, they still desire continuity and consistency. Our individuality is threatened by change, even when that change is overwhelmingly positive. Anxiety in people resists and defeats change the majority of the time.

Educational Change

Anderson (1993) identified six stages of change that indicate a move from a "traditional educational system" to a system that "emphasizes interconnectedness, active learning, shared decision making, and higher levels of achievement for all students." These stages are:

1. Maintenance of the Old System—Educators maintain the current system and do not see the need to change to adapt to the present conditions. New knowledge about teaching and learning is absent from the organization.

2. Awareness—Multiple people in the organization realize the current way of doing things is not working, but do not know what to do.
3. Exploration—Stakeholders examine other schools that are trying different methods. New methods are tried in "low-risk" scenarios.
4. Transition—the new way of doing things gains commitment from the necessary amount of stakeholders and more risks are taken in areas that are crucial if change is going to occur.
5. Emergence of New Infrastructure—the changes begin to become accepted and maintained.
6. Predominance of the New System—the effective elements of the new methods operate as "defined by the new system." Key stakeholders start to examine even more effective methods and procedures (p. 16).

Anderson (1993) also identified six key elements of change to be examined by schools as they move through the process. Doing so would greatly enhance the understanding of where the entity was at in terms of progress with the change process. These six were:

1. Vision—all stakeholders agree on what the system should look like and be getting done.
2. Public and Political Support—all stakeholders agree changes need to be made and support grows as the vision starts to be seen in procedures and practice.
3. Networking—communication throughout the system on the progress of the new change takes place and the school becomes more closely linked.
4. Teaching and Learning Changes—the heart of the new system is that "teaching and learning are based on best available research on how people learn." **"If changes do not occur in teaching and learning, all the other changes have little value."
5. Administrative Roles and Responsibilities—in order for changes to take place in classrooms, the roles and responsibilities of the administration need to move from hierarchical to one of shared decision making.
6. Policy Alignment—policies of the system need to be examined and aligned to support the new system. (p. 17)

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) advocated that there are two types of change that occur in schools. They described them as "incremental change" and "deep change" (p. 66). The two types of change are also known as first-order change and second-order change. First-order change takes place incrementally. Second-order change is not incremental. "It involves dramatic departures from the expected, both in defining a

given problem and in finding a solution" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 66). First-order change in a school takes place in a series of small steps that are not a drastic departure from the way the school has been operating. Second-order change in a school requires the entity to think and act in different ways. It "alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 66)

Fullan (2001) believed that in order to successfully bring about change in schools, educators have to change the culture. He stated that,

> It is a particular kind of reculturing for which we strive; one that activates and deepens moral purpose through collaborative work cultures that respect differences and constantly build and test knowledge against measurable results—a culture within one realizes that sometimes being off balance is a learning moment. (p. 45)

The point of PLCs is to change the culture of a school from a focus on the individual (their work, knowledge, responsibility) to that of a collaborative team approach. PLCs are a tool for changing the culture. As Murphy and Lick (2005) stated,

> School culture reflects the interrelationship of shared assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors that are acquired over time by members of a school. . . . School cultures can be realigned through a process called *cultural shift*. Such a cultural transformation requires realigning, in some measure, assumptions, beliefs and behaviors to make them more consistent with the new directions of the school. One important strength of the study group process is that is has the capability to bring about cultural shifts and, through such shifts, desirable changes in how a school functions, with the flow being more like a wave than a sequence (p. 75).

Educational Reform

> *Our typical attempts to reform our schools not only fail but will have a corrupting effect as we engage in the pretense of instructional improvement.*
> –Schmoker (2006, p. 30)

There have been many attempts at reforming education and schools in the United States. Each of which has had a limited effect and short duration.

One such reform was Outcome-Based Education (OBE). OBE is similar to the total quality movement in business and manufacturing. Proponents of OBE thought the best way for people and businesses to get where they were going was to first determine where they were and then where they wanted to be. They would then develop a plan (backwards) to get from here to there. OBE also attempted to change the way an effective education is measured by changing the focus from inputs (such as credits earned and hours of instruction), to results or outcomes (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

Some of the arguments for OBE were that it would promote high expectations and greater learning for students. It also would prepare students for the 21st Century, created more authentic forms of assessment, and "encourage decision making regarding curriculum, teaching methods, school structure and management at each school or district level" (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

The arguments against OBE were that schools that adopted it would be in conflict with higher education over admission requirements, standardized test scores and credit hours. There was also concern that a portion of the outcomes placed too much emphasis on feelings, values, attitudes and beliefs, and not enough on student achievement of factual knowledge. Concerns were also expressed about the subjective nature of evaluation in OBE (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

Outcome-Based Education did not work and did not provide any meaningful reform. The reason it failed, according to Schmoker (2006), was:

> For all the good that this movement has done in helping us examine and define educational outcomes, it subtly lost its concern with continuous, information-based improvement. Among so-called outcome-based schools and districts, one could rarely find any systematic means to analyze outputs against instruction and

inputs . . . despite all the time, talk, and conferences attended, only a handful of districts showed any real educational benefits from the outcome-based movement (p. 6).

Another reason offered for the demise of OBE is that, "Testimonials, speeches, and narrative descriptions may be inspirational and helpful, but they provide little solid ground on which to build a reform movement" (Evans & King, 1994, p. 12).

Another school reform was undertaken by the federal government in 1994 with the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227). This was the beginning of the standards movement in public education. One of the premises of Goals 2000 was that children would attain higher achievement levels if more was expected of them. Goals 2000 established a framework to create academic standards, measure student progress towards the standards, and provide support to students needed to meet them. Eight of the more important goals of the law were:

> By the year 2000—
> - All children in America will start school ready to learn.
> - The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent
> - All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, the arts, history and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy.
> - United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
> - Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
> - Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
> - The nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the

> knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
> - Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. (Paris, 1994, as cited in NCREL, n.d.)

One outcome of Goals 2000 and the standards movement in Nebraska was STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System). This was a partnership between Nebraska schools, Educational Service Units (ESU, and the Nebraska Department of Education that was established as a result of LB812 (The Education Quality Accountability Act). This legislation established the requirements and procedures for implementing standards, assessing them and reporting results (accountability) for Nebraska public schools.

The researcher observed that the STARS process for many Nebraska school districts was to some extent, a PLC. Teams of teachers in numerous ESU's and other consortiums collaborated to talk about curriculum (standards), planned and evaluated assessments, and then met frequently to discuss how those assessments worked and how their students performed on them. Based on the researcher's observations, there was a great deal of time and resources that the State of Nebraska invested in this process and the results seemed to be very positive.

The frequency of these meetings and the fact that the teams were not from the same school perhaps prevented it from being labeled a true PLC, however the researcher thought it was worth mentioning as an insight into the power and results that might be attained by establishing a PLC at a school.

Passed by large majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives, the

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was thought to be a great moment in the

history of our nation and a major effort to improve public education.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website (2011), NCLB is,

Designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works. Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. They must produce annual state and school district report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run. (http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing/jhtml)

The law is still in effect and schools are responding to it. Attempts at

reauthorization failed in 2007 and it will be interesting to see how the act is modified in

upcoming years.

One provision of NCLB requires teachers and administrators to closely look at the

areas of assessment and "high-quality" professional development. More than ever

before, educators are looking at "what they do, how they do it, and the effects it has on

students" (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p.58). PLCs would help school districts address this

provision if implemented properly.

School Improvement

School improvement is sometimes packaged as strategic planning. Kouzes and

Posner (1995) lamented, "strategic planning doesn't work" (p. 244) and never did. It is

like many reforms that have been undertaken in education. It was undertaken by a great

many schools without evidence that it worked. Joyce (2004) wrote, "elaborate

improvement planning has failed miserably and in plain sight" (p. 76). A study in Kentucky by Kannapel and Clements (2005) found that most school improvement plans had a negative relationship to achievement. They actually reduced improvement chances. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) wrote, "Formal planning is essentially unrelated to organizational performance" (p. 43). Collins (2001) found in his studies that models like those schools have adopted move organizations from their real purpose. Organizations become, "scattered and diffused, moving on many levels . . . doomed to pursue many ends at the same time" (p. 91).

Schmoker (2006) examined hundreds of school improvement plans. All of them had been done in accordance with state education department, school district, or accreditation agency guidelines. He found in going over these documents with agency officials, "Even they admit, on close examination, to the havoc that is wrought by these lengthy, ambiguously worded documents." An education department in one state had 130 requirements in its school improvement document. An official there agreed with Schmoker that any five could, "overwhelm most school systems while having little or no impact on what is taught or how well" (p. 35). Many state education departments, school districts, and accreditation agencies are reluctant to change anything because too many resources (time and money) have been committed to them.

Effective and worthwhile school improvement goals should target increased student achievement. This process is described in great detail to Nebraska schools by Rule 10 of the Nebraska Department of Education. Odden and Wallace (2003) found that "improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to produce student achievement gains" (p. 64). Mike Schmoker (2006) also argued that instruction has the greatest effect

on student achievement and concluded that "most (though not all) instruction, despite our best intentions, is not effective but could improve significantly and swiftly through ordinary and accessible arrangements among teachers and administrators" (p. 10).

Goodwin and Dean (2007) identified three school improvement mistakes that schools make and offered suggestions on how to avoid them. The first mistake schools make is "treating the symptoms, not the underlying problem" (p. 3). Schools need to dig deeper into problems that they notice while examining data. Too frequently they attempt interventions that do not succeed because the underlying problem is not addressed.

The second mistake school districts make is, "focusing only on tangibles and ignoring intangibles" (Goodwin & Dean, 2007, p. 3). They found that schools often ignore the "soft" issues such as environment, culture, attitudes and beliefs and these are very important to having a successful school improvement effort. They mentioned, "the importance of creating a 'purposeful community,' one that comes together to accomplish its goals" (Goodwin & Dean, 2007, p 3).

The third mistake often committed by school districts is trying to do too much in a plan. Instead of focusing on one or two goals, schools have multiple goals and several action items regarding each goal. It is too much for staff members to keep track of or take seriously, and as a result, not much work gets done (Goodwin & Dean, 2007).

Schools in Nebraska are required to go through the school improvement process (Rule 10-009.01). The process includes a periodic review by an external team at least once every five years. One shortcoming of the process noted by the researcher is the lack of time that is often given to the process by school districts. Effective PLCs are constantly looking at instruction and student achievement and may perhaps be a more

effective school improvement tool than what is currently being done in many Nebraska schools.

PLCs—A Process to Address School Improvement

Educators in the past chose the correct textbooks and programs to bring about improvement in schools. These items were "teacher-proofed" with many activities to direct and guide teachers. The change process was also examined closely when putting these programs into practice, but not enough attention was given to it (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

What developed from this error was a lack of full participation in school improvement efforts by all staff members. A challenge for schools in the past few decades has been nurturing educators during the change process so that school improvement efforts are continuous (Hord, 2011).

A new strategy to help address the problems of continuous school improvement and helping teachers through the change process is PLCs. In a PLC, teachers must conduct collegial activities throughout the school and their actions need to have student's learning as their goal (Jalongo, 1991). In addition, PLCs involve a commitment to teacher preparedness, professional development, and granting increased autonomy and decision making for teachers (Hord, 2011).

In a summary of studies and reports examined by Hord (1997), she noted the following results for staff and students that have been improved by creating PLCs. The results pertaining to staff are:

- reduction of isolation of teachers;
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission;

- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success;
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners;
- increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles that they play in helping all students achieve expectations;
- higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students;
- more satisfaction and higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism;
- significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners made more quickly that in traditional schools;
- commitment to making significant and lasting changes; and
- higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental, systemic change. (Hord, 1997)

The results for students whose teachers participated in PLCs were:

- decreased dropout rate and fewer classes "cut;"
- lower rates of absenteeism;
- increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools;
- larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading that in traditional schools; and
- smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds" (Hord, 1997).

It is possible that PLCs could be a powerful force for empowering staff that may lead to school reform and improvement and also increase student achievement (Hord, 1997).

Other authors have discussed what schools could do to avoid the mistake that schools make in school improvement by setting goals and developing actions plans that are too ambitious.

What is advocated in a PLC is what Collins (2001, as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p.34) called "simple plans." They focus on actions and opportunities. Schmoker (2006) advocated teachers meeting twice a month for 45 minutes. During this time, achievement data is examined, teachers set goals, and then reconvene to make sure students are

learning and improve the quality of their instruction. Hord and Sommers (2008) concluded, "The bottom line is whether the PLC has served students well, for this is the PLCs goal and purpose for existing" (p. 131). In their model, students' results are constantly (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly) monitored by everyone (principal, teachers, students themselves).

PLCs can also assist in changing the culture of a school, which would be important in a school improvement initiative.

"Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing changed individuals into unchanged environments. Rather, change leaders work on changing the context, helping create new settings conducive to learning and sharing that learning" (Fullan, 2002, p. 411). The establishment of PLCs at a school may change the context for teachers and may create new settings for learning and sharing of what is learned.

Rogers Diffusion/Innovation Process Theories

Two theories that interested and informed the researcher while conducting this study of school districts that had implemented PLCs were Rogers' Diffusion and Innovation Process in Organizations theories. Rogers (1983) defined diffusion theory as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p. 5). A large amount of the early research done by Rogers examined the innovator and what factors were responsible for the adoption of an innovation. Rogers (1983) claimed that many individuals do not adopt an innovation unless the organization they are a member of adopts it first.

After conducting further research, Rogers (1983) expanded on the diffusion theory and developed Rogers' Innovation Process in Organizations theory. This theory

involved a five-stage process on how organizations adopt and then implement an initiative.

Rogers' (1983) process contains two phases—an Initiation Phase and Implementation Phase. Rogers stated that an organization could not skip one of the five stages. Each had to be completed in order to move to the next stage.

The Initiation Phase contains two stages. The first stage, Agenda Setting, is a continuous process where the organization is "identifying and prioritizing needs and problems" and search the "organization's environment to locate innovations" (Rogers, 1995, p. 391). The second stage of the Initiation Phase is Matching. During the Matching stage, an organization, "determines the feasibility of the innovation in solving the organization's problems" (Rogers, 1995, p. 394).

The Implementation Phase has three stages—Redefining/Restructuring, Clarifying, and Routinizing. During the Redefining/Restructuring stage, an organization changes the innovation to make it work for the organization and the organization morphs to fit the innovation. Creativity is required "to avoid, or overcome, the misalignments that occur between the innovation and the organization" (p. 395).

During the next stage of Clarifying, the innovation starts to become "imbedded" in the organization. The organization's participants begin to comprehend the innovation. They then move on to the final stage, Routinizing. Rogers (1995) believed an organization moves to this stage "when the innovation has become incorporated into the regular activities of the organization" (p. 399).

These theories informed the researcher as the study was conducted because the three districts involved in this study were perhaps at different levels of implementation

and one of the districts had changed the model of PLC it utilized to fit the districts needs better.

Teacher Isolationism

It has been said by many reformers in education that "teaching is the second most common act that adults do in private." It is unfortunate, but true that many educators spend most of their day in isolation, not being able to interact and reflect with colleagues. DuFour and Eaker (1998, as cited in Schmoker, 2006) noted, "The traditional school often functions as a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot" (p. 23).

Teachers are professionals and the conventional wisdom would suggest that being a trained professional, they know how to do their job and do it effectively. There is some truth to this notion. Schmoker (2006) pointed out that the assumption that teachers can do their job effectively and have received appropriate training and thus should be left alone has created schools where teachers have not used effective methods or received any feedback that would tell them they aren't. Wise (2004, as cited in Schmoker, 2006) commented,

> Professionals do not work alone; they work in teams. Professionals begin their preparation in the university but do not arrive in the workplace ready to practice. They continue their preparation on the job. In medical, legal, and architectural settings, services are provided by experienced and novice professionals working together to accomplish the goal—to heal the patient, win the lawsuit, plan the building. The team delivers the services . . . the novices learn by doing, with feedback and correction" (p. 25).

There are some schools in Nebraska that have formal or informal plans for mentoring new teachers. They were obviously developed due to a perceived need to mentor and advise new teachers in a district. Having some sort of plan in place is likely

better than nothing, but they might still fall short of the benefits that a novice teacher could gain from being part of, and receiving feedback from, an effective team of teachers. A PLC could be used to enhance and augment an existing mentoring plan.

Another factor associated with teacher isolation is it disguises the practices of other teachers. The educator in isolation never has to come to the conclusion that one of their colleagues may be considerably more effective or that their own teaching is inferior. Schmoker (2006) discussed that, "Without any point of comparison, the isolated teacher never has to confront the fact that (1) the teacher next door may be three times as effective as I am, or (2) much of my teaching is inferior (though parents and principals seem to like me as much—or maybe more than—that teacher next door)" (p. 24).

Isolation of teachers in schools has "allowed teaching to acquire an outsized aura of mystique and complexity" (Schmoker, 2006, p. 25). Educators also insist too frequently that every student and every class they teach is different. Combined, these two factors make it difficult for schools to make generalizations about effective methods of teaching.

Privacy in the name of professionalism can have negative effects in the classroom. The Learning 24/7 study (2005) found "high-yield" strategies happen in only a small percentage of the 1,500 classrooms that were visited by researchers. Without the monitoring, professional support, and feedback of their colleagues on what is effective, educators tend to gravitate towards poor or popular methods. Haycock (2005) found that: "if we leave virtually every instructional choice up to individual teachers who work alone, then inferior practices will dominate in most schools" (p. 25).

Leadership of a Professional Learning Community

One of the key components of leadership that principals should have according to Fullan (2001) is committing themselves, "to constantly generating and increasing knowledge inside and outside the organization" (p. 6). Continuous learning—by both students and teachers is the cornerstone of a PLC.

Implementing a PLC in a school building certainly is a systemic change and the building principal plays a pivotal role in implementing this change. As Hord and Sommers (2008) found,

> For any who work in schools, whether internally on the staff or externally as consultant or supervisor, it is clear that the role of the principal is paramount to any endeavor to change pedagogical practice, adopt new curricula, reshape the school's culture and climate, or take on other improvement targets (p. 6)

It takes courage, confidence and a great deal of work for principals to establish a PLC in their building and they must build (or have already built) relationships with their staff. Covey (1990) stated:

> People are very tender, very sensitive inside. I don't believe age or experience makes much difference. Inside, even within the most toughened and calloused exteriors, are the tender feelings and emotions of the heart. That's why in relationships, the little things are the big things. (pp. 192-193)

One of the transformations that principals have to undergo is from being an "instructional leader" to a "learning leader" (DuFour, 2002). DuFour realized in his work as a principal that he was too focused on the traditional supervision model and didn't focus enough on results. Despite exceeding the legal requirements for supervision of teachers while he was a principal, DuFour found his incredible effort yielded no student achievement gains. Only when he focused on being a "learning leader" did he start seeing the results in student achievement. The "learning leader" he describes is one who

focuses on assessment results and spends more time reflecting with teachers on their work rather than the traditional role of observing and advising teachers.

Teamwork

> You would think that schools in total know a lot about teaching reading, writing and mathematics—and you would be right. You would also think that accessing this information would be a top priority—and you would be wrong. What is going on here? Well, over the years schools have built up all kinds of structural and cultural barriers to sharing, and they are having a devil of a time overcoming this inertia. (If they weren't so well protected by having nearly a monopoly, and if they weren't so essential to the future of democracy, they would be long gone.) (Fullan, 2001, p. 99)

One interesting fact that Fullan (2001) has found however, is that when educators experience sitting down together and share their knowledge, they are "thirsting for more" (p. 99)

Teachers working in teams can be a powerful force for improving schools. Surowiecki (2004) pointed out that teams are "genuinely smarter than the smartest people within them" (p. 111).

Teamwork is one of the key components to the success of PLCs. It enables teachers to give constant and focused attention to the details and results of effective lessons and units (Schmoker, 2006).

There is much research that has been done regarding the benefits of teamwork and collaboration in schools. Wildman and Niles (1987, as cited in DuFour, 1999b) found that teams allow teachers to assess their ideas about teaching and "expand their level of expertise" by making them cognizant of other teacher's ideas. (p. 1). In another study, Fielding and Schalock (1985) discovered that teacher's anxiety regarding taking risks was lessened because fellow team members were there to encourage them and provide moral support.

Little (1990, as cited in DuFour 1999b), reported that student achievement and teacher confidence were raised by teamwork in schools. There was also more support given to novice teachers. An "increased pool of ideas, materials and methods" was also documented (p. 1).

In a study by Klein, Medrich, and Perez-Ferreiro (1996, as cited in DuFour, 1999b), team structures were found to "reinforce changes in school culture and commitment to improvement initiatives" (p. 1).

Definition of a Professional Learning Community

There are many models of PLCs. A closer examination revealed that although they have subtle differences, for the most part they all have some common characteristics that make them similar and effective.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) focus on teacher collaboration and a commitment by staff members that all students will learn. They contend that a PLC occurs when schools begin in earnest to align their practices with a commitment to learning for all. The focus of the collaboration is centered on three basic questions. What exactly is it that students are expected to learn? How will it be known when each student has acquired that knowledge? What happens in the school when a student does not learn?

Hord and Sommers (2008), in their research of PLCs, identified five characteristics that were essential parts of making a PLC. The first characteristic was shared vision, values and beliefs of the faculty. Their focus is consistently on the learning of students, which is made stronger by the staff's own continuous learning and thus the name, PLC. The second characteristic is shared and supportive leadership. The administration and teachers share decision making and the relationship between them is

more collegial than hierarchical. The third characteristic is collective learning and its application. The community defines what will be learned and how to meet students' needs. The fourth characteristic is supportive conditions. Establishing PLCs requires structural factors such as places to meet, time and policy alignment. Relational factors such as telling the truth, openness, respect and caring for one another also need to be supported. The final characteristic Hord and Sommers identified was shared personal practice. Members of the PLC offer and receive feedback that contributes to their own growth and improvement and that of the school.

Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996, as cited in Murphy, 2005) discovered five core characteristics of professional school communities. These characteristics were:

1. Teachers and administrators share basic norms and values about children, learning, and teaching.
2. Reflective dialogue, rich and recurring talk about teaching practice and student learning, enlarges the teachers' world and helps them view teaching from one another's perspectives.
3. Deprivation of practice occurs when teachers practice their craft openly and problem-solve together.
4. A collective focus on student learning drives decisions.
5. Collaboration exists across grade-level groups. (p. 32)

The Whole-Faculty-Study-Group Model (WFSG) is another model of PLCs. The model is guided by the question, "What are students learning and achieving as a result of what teachers are learning and doing in study groups?" Murphy and Lick (2005). There are also five "guiding principles in WFSGs. They are: (1) students are first, (2) everyone participates, (3) leadership is shared, (4) responsibilty is equal, and (5) the work is public."

In summary, most models of PLCs have these common characteristics: (a) there is collaboration amongst teachers (they work in teams); (b) the focus is on learning

(students and teachers); (c) teams meet on a regular basis and student learning is the focus of the meetings; and (d) leadership is shared.

Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities

As stated by Elmore (1996), "A significant body of circumstantial evidence points to a deep, systematic incapacity of U.S. schools, and the practitioners who work within them, to develop, incorporate, and extend new ideas about teaching and learning in anything but a small fraction of schools and classrooms" (p. 2). Much of this can be blamed upon the norm in most schools of teachers working in isolation from their peers. The results from schools utilizing PLCs have shown them to be powerful and effective tools for improving both instruction and student achievement.

Hord and Sommers (2008) have indicated that much is still not known about establishing PLCs in schools. "Although much has been written by researchers and practitioners about the importance of PLCs, staff learning, and collaborative work, there is little solid material for those school reformers who need help creating a PLC in their school" (p. 7). Most of what is known was gleaned from the actual trials and tribulations of those trying to establish PLCs in their school. Not a lot is known about specifics such as who did what, what were the student demographics of the school, faculty characteristics, etc. Establishing a PLC takes a great deal of time and studying its inner workings and keys to effectiveness will as well.

Dissertation Research: Professional Learning Communities

There were several studies on Professional Learning Communities conducted by doctoral students that informed the researcher's study.

Dumas (2010), examined the knowledge that principals must have in order to create a collaborative culture for educators in their building. The results of his study indicated that principals had knowledge of many of the elements that it took to create such a culture. He recommended further studies in the "Knowing-Doing Gap" and how to overcome it, since principals had the knowledge, but were not implementing that knowledge to create collaborative cultures in their buildings.

A study by Roberts (2010) focused on educators perceptions of "their personal skill level in working collaboratively and focusing on academic results while implementing a Professional Learning Community" and whether or not this had an effect on student achievement. The study also examined educator perceptions with the three themes of PLCs, which were: (a) assuring student learn at high levels, (b) creating a culture of collaboration, and (c) focusing on academic results.

The major conclusion of the study was that teachers perceived they had strong skills within all three themes of PLCs and perceived that PLCs improved student achievement. Collaboration and experience were perceived to be areas of strength by educators and time and data were listed as areas of need. The study recommended ongoing staff development regarding the PLC process and districts should develop a "more consistent process and consistent PLC forms to be used in all schools" (Roberts, 2010).

The impact of Whole Faculty Study Groups on student achievement and teacher practices was examined in a study conducted by Wendell (2010). She found the perception of teachers and administrators were that WFSGs did change teacher practices, but educators "were reluctant to attribute increased learning of students to WFSG alone."

(Wendell, 2010). She also found that the WFSGs, "through the use of collaboration and implementing new curriculum and teaching strategies, evolved into an important element of the district's school improvement process."

In a study by Long (2008), of Missouri high schools that had participated in a PLC project, the findings indicated no significant difference in achievement levels in language arts and mathematics when comparing schools that had implemented PLCs and those that had not.

A study by Gaspar (2010) examined the professional development program of a rural school district. The study focused on what school leaders did to replace a "traditional, workshop-based program that was deemed ineffective with a new professional development model." The new model created PLCs in the district. Gaspar (2010) found that there were many positive results from the change. She also found that the new model may have been even more effective if teachers had been given more opportunity for input regarding the adoption and implementation of the new model. PLC effectiveness is dependent in part on shared leadership and decision making and strengthening democratic leadership was essential if the district's PLCs were to continue to mature was another conclusion she reached.

A study by Bunker (2008) examined PLCs, teacher collaboration, and student achievement. She stated that most research on PLCs and collaboration, "often fails to demonstrate a relationship between teacher collaboration and academic achievement." Her study examined the relationships between teacher collaboration and student achievement, and factors educators reported to help and hurt both the collaborative process and student achievement.

Results from the study found that educator views of the collaborative process had

no relationship to academic achievement or student growth in reading or math. An

educator's skill level in the collaborative process correlated significantly with student

achievement in reading and math and student growth in reading and math.

Conclusions drawn from a study by Adams (2009) on PLCs at three Georgia

elementary schools were:

> 1) Professional learning is fundamental to school improvement efforts; 2)
> Developing staff collaboration is an important tool for improving instructional
> programs in schools through professional learning teams to improve teacher
> knowledge and teaching skills; 3) Professional learning is an integral component
> of school and district school improvement initiatives and should support the goals
> of the district and schools improvement plans; 4) The option to choose
> professional learning activities is important to teachers; 5) Teachers prefer time
> for professional learning and collaboration during the regular school day; 6)
> Professional Learning Communities provide a context of collegiality to support
> teachers and administrators as they strive to improve student learning.

Professional Development

The National Staff Development Council sponsored advertisements in *Phi Delta*

Kappan and other publications in 2004 that called most professional development,

"irrelevant," "inadequate," "unfocused," and "a complete waste of time" (Phi Delta

Kappan, 2004, as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p. 26). Schools and teachers were cited as

implementing what they had learned during professional development. The practices

mentioned at workshops can have sound research behind them, but if they are not

transferred to the classroom, they are a "complete waste of time" (Phi Delta Kappan,

2004, as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p. 26). For the most part, coaching is not being done

when new practices are tried, no feedback is given, and assessment results are not looked

at to see if the new practice is working. Once again, teachers are left working in isolation

and schools leave them alone, "while assuming (wrongly) that their programs and training are having a positive impact on practice" (Schmoker, 2006, p. 26).

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) identified six characteristics of effective professional development that incorporate professionals as both teachers and learners. Murphy and Lick (2005) believed that all six are found in the WFSG model of PLCs. The six include:

1. engaging teachers in teaching, assessment, observation and reflection;
2. participant driven inquiry, reflection, and experimentation;
3. Collaborative—knowledge must be shared among teachers and focus on the practice of communities, not the individual;
4. it must involve educators' work with students;
5. the development must be "sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching and the collective solving of specific problems of practice;" and
6. the professional development needs to be linked to other components of change in the school. (p. 34)

In a study by Joyce and Showers (1983), it was found that only 10% of teachers transferred skills or new behaviors to the classroom when experiencing a staff development presentation only. There were additional gains of 2 to 3% for each step if teachers were given a demonstration, protected practice, practiced and received feedback. What is most powerful is the coaching aspect of training. It was found that 95% of teachers utilized their learned skill in the classroom when they received coaching.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) identified three context standards that linked staff development with improvement in student learning. The three standards are community, leadership and resources (NSDC, 2003). The community standard is adults in the school organized into learning communities and their goals are congruent with the school. The leadership standard is skilled administrators guiding

instructional improvement on a continuous basis. The final context standard of resources is provided by the school and supports teachers learning and working together.

Schmoker (2004) proposed that districts reevaluate their workshops and "standard-issue staff development" that have not been effective (p. 429). It is becoming increasingly clear that workshops do not work. Stiggins (1999) pointed out that there ineffectiveness stems from the fact that workshops, "don't permit the application and experimentation in real classrooms, and sharing that experience in a team effort" (p. 198).

PLCs are a departure from the traditional staff development approach currently utilized by many school districts in Nebraska. Many districts opt for a one or two day workshop at their school or ESU. Much of the demonstration, practice and coaching is missing. This leads to very little transfer of new skills to the classroom.

Shared Leadership

One of the obstacles that must be overcome by principals in establishing a PLC is that of shared leadership, rather than the hierarchal leadership structure that many schools currently employ. The principal's role needs to be one of a nurturer and supporter of staff if they are to collaborate and make decisions about school processes and programs. Dillon-Peterson (1986, as cited in DuFour, 1999b) found that establishing teaching teams in schools, "fostered better decisions and increased the likelihood of ownership in the decisions" (p. 2).

Principals arguably can have a difficult time making this transition. Carmichael (1982, as cited in Hord, 1997, p. 1) discussed the "omnicompetence" view that staffs often have of the principal that often gets internalized by its subject. This perception makes it difficult for teachers to make suggestions that lead to improvement or increased

effectiveness at the school. It also hinders a principal's ability to recognize the

importance and powerful potential of teachers contributions to decision making as well as

the principal's personal need for professional development. Carmichael suggested that

the omnicompetence view of the principal be dismissed and be replaced with the

participation of the principal in professional development. Kleine-Kracht (1993) echoed

this sentiment. Administrators and teachers need to be learners: "questioning,

investigating, and seeking solutions" for improving schools. The school model of

"teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completely altered . . . there

is no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for

everyone to contribute" (p. 393).

Early Research on Effectiveness

There is limited research on the effectiveness of PLCs and their effect on student

achievement. Murphy and Lick (2005) pointed out that merely having study groups in a

school does not improve results. What the teachers do in those groups and in their

classrooms is what leads to improvement. It was also noted by Murphy and Lick (2005)

that PLCs are "means to an end." Common means in education are computers,

textbooks, teachers and buildings. The ends are the student achievement data that is

gathered such as ACT scores, graduation rates, and standards assessment results.

Murphy and Lick (2005) have probably done the most of documenting results of

PLCs in terms of student achievement. ATLAS Communities is a national

comprehensive school reform model. Murphy and Lick's WFSG system is at the heart of

professional development in all ATLAS schools. Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn,

New York is an ATLAS school. The school started a PLC in January 2000. The

graduation rate at Robeson increased from 65% in 2003 to 85% in 2005. The school is 90% black, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% White. A Harvard University study found that only 35% of black and Latino students in New York finish high school in 4 years. There has also been a steady increase in the percentage of students at Robeson who met the graduation standard on New York's Regents exams.

In Lousiana, the State Department of Education implemented the WFSG program in 2000. The LINCS (Learning Intensive Networking Communities for Success) program was the avenue that brought the two together. "High-quality" professional development was the goal in 172 low performing schools throughout Louisiana. The same content areas for standards in Nebraska (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies) were the targets for improvement in Louisiana. Results of a study on student achievement in LINCS schools over a two-year period, "show that the growth on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and 4th-grade LEAP for mathematics has been striking" (Murphy & Lick 2005, p. 206).

Springfield Public Schools in Springfield, Missouri began WFSG in 2001. Anita Kissinger is the director of staff development for Springfield Public Schools. Forty-three of 51 schools in the district had implemented WFSGs. During the 2004 WFSG National Conference, Kissinger reported that a majority of building principals felt that WFSGs had impacted student achievement in a positive way. Sixty percent of schools started study groups in the first year, which was 2001. In 2003, 90% of schools were using the WFSG model. Springfield went from being one point above being "provisionally accredited" in 2000-2001 to "accredited with distinction" in 2002-2003 (p. 207).

Murphy and Lick (2005) also admit that more research needs to be done on PLCs. When asked if study groups will increase student achievement, Murphy and Lick said there is, "no simple yes" answer that can be given. The answer would have to start with, "It depends on. . . ."

Barriers to Professional Learning Communities

There are many barriers that schools and principals will face when trying to establish a PLC. DuFour (1999a) stated, "One of the most formidable obstacles a school will face in attempting to function as a PLC is the tradition of teacher isolation that has represented the norm in most schools."

Murphy and Lick (2005) also made note of the fact that many teachers don't see the value in working with other teachers in study groups. There is already a tremendous workload on teachers that inhibits their commitment to learning groups. Based on her observations of study groups, she stated, "One can almost hear the unspoken voices saying, "Let's hurry, I've got work to do in my classroom." Murphy (1992) also made the following observation:

> An insight that came early on was contradictory to my assumption that teachers would eagerly jump at the opportunity to meet regularly with colleagues to focus on their own new learnings and that of their students. I was not prepared for the resistance. Teachers accustomed to following instructional materials closely and letting the textbook do the planning sometimes found that thinking through lessons was onerous work. Some felt that asking for help was a sign of weakness. A few wondered whether colleagues were a legitimate source of help and were not sure that their colleagues knew enough. (p. 74)

It is not the norm in most U.S. schools that teachers look at student work from another classroom or teachers observe their colleagues while they teach. The examination of student data could also be considered something that is not the norm in most schools. This is another obstacle to overcome in establishing PLCs. There are not

a great deal of people who are proficient in teaching educators how to look at student work (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Merely examining the student work is not enough. Teachers need to know what they are looking for and meeting protocols need to be established in order for schools to "reap the benefits" (Murphy & Lick, 2005, p. 216).

Establishing PLCs is both a cultural and structural change, thus making its implementation and institutionalization a difficult task for a building administrator. Hord and Sommers (2008) caution against the hormone TTSP (this too shall pass) affecting the implementation of a PLC.

Having the appropriate support of district leaders for these changes are vital in order to establish PLCs. Whether the school is large or small, urban or rural, there must be a commitment to change from the superintendent, school board, district office, etc. Resources must be provided in order for the change to be initiated and institutionalized. These resources can be financial, technical assistance, or perhaps the most important resource—time.

Time for groups to meet is another obstacle that schools have had to overcome in order to establish PLCs. There needs to be time for groups to meet. Almost all models of PLCs had examples of ways that districts have overcome this obstacle. However, no matter what way a school chooses to overcome the obstacle of time, it still has to be supported by district leaders.

Another obstacle that schools sometimes need to overcome in establishing PLCs is the local teachers union at their school. The professional contracts and the stipulations that they contain should be closely examined. Unions can actually be an ally of the prudent principal who seeks their input as the implementation process proceeds. Hord

and Sommers (2008) suggested that unions are starting to gain interest in PLCs. They see

the benefits in professional development and increased learning for teachers and

administrators. While they have not become outspoken advocates for establishing PLCs,

unions would at least not stifle the process if their input was sought throughout the

process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative multiple site study examined how educators in selected

elementary and secondary schools in the State of Nebraska implemented PLCs in their

buildings and examined their perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs.

The strategy of utilizing a case study starts with "a logic of design . . . a strategy

to be preferred when circumstances and research problems are appropriate rather than an

ideological commitment to be followed whatever the circumstances" (Platt, 1992, p. 46).

Yin (2009) provides a "two-fold, technical definition of case studies."

> A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary
> phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the
> boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case
> study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will
> be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result, relies on
> multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating
> fashion, and as another result, benefits from the prior development of theoretical
> propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 18)

The phenomenon in this study was PLCs and the context was in selected school

districts in Nebraska. A case study was utilized by the researcher because, "The essence

of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study is that it tries to

illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were

implemented, and with what result" (Schramm, 1971, as cited in Yin, 2009, p. 17).   The

researcher wanted to find out why schools had decided to utilize PLCs, how they were

implemented, and examine the perceptions of educators of the impact of PLCs.

The researcher used a multiple-site design for this study. If the researcher is given

a choice, multiple-case designs are preferred over single-case. The odds of doing a good

case study will be increased versus utilizing a single-case design. The reason for this is that you decrease vulnerability by not putting "all your eggs in one basket" and more important, the benefits in the analysis of having multiple cases may be increased (Yin, 2009).

Multiple case designs have advantages over their single-case counterparts. The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriot & Firestone, 1983).

The researcher wanted to find out why certain schools in Nebraska made the decision to implement PLCs in their building, how they implemented them and what results they were seeing in regards to staff development, school improvement and student achievement because of the decision to implement PLCs.

Social Constructivism Approach

A Social Constructivism approach was selected for this study. In this paradigm, researchers seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. According to Creswell (2007),

> They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things . . . constructivist researchers often address the "processes" of interaction among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they "position themselves" in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. Thus the researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background. The researcher's intent, then, is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. (p. 8)

The researcher took a social constructivist approach to examine the interaction of educators involved in a PLC and the processes that occurred in a PLC. Having implemented a PLC, the researcher had developed a background in their development

and function and wanted to learn more about how other schools developed and operated their PLCs.

Instructional Models and Social Constructivism

Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective stress the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahon, 1997). Lave and Wenger (1991) make the assertion that a society's practical knowledge is situated in relations among practitioners, their practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice. Because of this, learning should involve such knowledge and practice (Gredler, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Peer collaboration would be an instructional model included in the social constructivist approach and is the driving force behind a PLC. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact PLCs were having on student achievement, school improvement and staff development in school districts that had successfully implemented them. The social constructivist theory and its perspective on learning fits exactly with what a PLC is designed to do—have teachers work together to discuss and solve problems they are having in regards to students learning in their classroom. Working together, rather than in isolation, increases their learning and thus the learning of their students increases.

Research Questions

Five research questions will guide this study. These five questions include:

1. How did selected Nebraska educators learn about PLCs?

2. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on professional development in their schools?

3. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on school improvement in their schools?

4. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on student achievement in their schools?

5. What were the perceptions of selected Nebraska educators on why PLCs were effective?

Research Design

This research was a qualitative multiple-site study and analyzed the perceptions of educators who have implemented PLCs in the state of Nebraska. The perceptions were analyzed utilizing a Social Constructivist approach.

Study Design

Study participants were recruited by the researcher based on his prior knowledge of schools that were operating PLCs in their school districts. The researcher also sought districts that had been operating a PLC for a minimum of three years. This time frame would allow the researcher and educators participating in the study the opportunity to see if there had been an impact on school improvement, staff development and student achievement. Two urban districts in the southeastern part of Nebraska were selected. Both districts contained several high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools. A high school, middle school and elementary school were selected from each of the urban districts to examine PLCs among teachers of different age and grade levels.

The researcher also selected one rural school to be a part of the study. The school was in the southcentral part of Nebraska. It was a Class B school district according to its classification by the Nebraska State Activities Association. The rural school was selected

based on the researcher's prior knowledge of the school's PLC activities which were learned about at workshops attended by the researcher. The researcher wanted to investigate the dynamics involved in operating a PLC at a smaller school. Some of these dynamics included fewer teachers at a particular grade level or subject area. It was also known by the researcher that this school was utilizing a different PLC model than the urban districts.

The researcher contacted the director of staff development and the directors of secondary and elementary education for the two urban districts to request permission to conduct research and ask for their recommendations on which schools in their districts should participate in the study. The researcher contacted the superintendent of the rural school and obtained permission to conduct research and then contacted her to arrange for educators to be interviewed. Building principals of the six schools in the two urban districts were contacted to select teachers to interview and dates and times for interviews.

The researcher asked building principals to select three faculty members to participate in the interviews. The two requirements these faculty members needed to fulfill was that they had been teaching in the building for the three years that the PLC had been implemented and that they came from different PLC groups within the school. This latter requirement gave the researcher a wider perspective of PLC activities and teacher perceptions because the group interviewed would be teachers of different subject areas and ages of students.

The researcher also interviewed the director of staff development for one urban district and the director of school improvement for the other urban district to get a district-wide perception of the effects of PLCs. One district had new personnel serving in

the role of director of school improvement. The person previously serving in that position had moved to another district in Nebraska. That person was contacted and interviewed. His perceptions were thought to be of great value by the researcher for the study because of the instrumental role he obviously played in implementing PLCs at the district level.

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcriptions were made of the interviews. A total of 30 educators were interviewed. Eleven educators from School District A, 11 educators from School District B, and 8 educators from School District C participated in the interviews.

Study Participants

School District A

Three schools were selected at School District A based on the recommendations of the Director of Staff Development. The high school had an enrollment of approximately 2,180 students. The high school personnel interviewed included the building principal and mathematics teacher. Both had been at the school for over three years. While the researcher was limited to only two people to interview at the school, he was able to observe a 10th grade Language Arts PLC actually meet for approximately 45 minutes prior to the interviews. This helped confirm some of the responses that were given in the interviews by other personnel of School District A.

The middle school selected included students in grades 6-8 and the building enrollment is approximately 860 students. The researcher interviewed a team of educators at the same time due to time constraints and schedule conflicts. The educators interviewed included the assistant principal and five teachers. Among the five teachers

were a 6th grade Social Studies teacher, 6th grade Spanish teacher, 8th grade History teacher, 8th grade English teacher, and 8th grade Science teacher.

The elementary school in School District A included students in grades 3-5 and had a population of approximately 540 students. The building principal and two teachers (grades 3 and 4) were interviewed. The teachers were interviewed together and the building principal was interviewed separately.

School District B

Three schools were selected from School District B based on the recommendations of the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education for School District B. The high school chosen for the study had a student enrollment of approximately 1800 students. The high school personnel interviewed included the building principal, mathematics teacher, business teacher, and language arts teacher. All four members were interviewed separately.

The middle school selected for School District B included students in grades 6-8 and approximately 585 students were enrolled. The researcher discovered during the interviews that it was the only middle school in the district to meet AYP the previous year. Due to schedule conflicts, the researcher had to interview participants as a team. The team included the building principal, mathematics teacher and instrumental music teacher.

The elementary school selected for School District B included students in grades PreK-5 and has approximately 460 students enrolled. This school was recommended for the study by the Director of Elementary Education and ultimately selected by the researcher. The researcher decided to waive the three year minimum of operating a PLC

requirement for this school to be part of the study. The Director of Elementary Education informed the researcher that although the school was one of the newest in the district and had only been in operation for two years, the building principal and many of the teachers in the building had been involved in PLCs for three years or more. The principal and staff had also been involved in a great deal of planning and collaboration the year prior to the building opening. The director thought this building had one of the highest functioning PLCs in the district and the researcher decided that the perceptions gathered at this school would be valuable enough to waive the requirement. The building principal and three teachers were interviewed. A 3rd grade teacher, a 4th grade teacher, and a 5th grade teacher were the teachers interviewed. The principal and one of the teachers (3rd) were interviewed together. The other two teachers (4th and 5th) were interviewed separately. The researcher thought, based on the perceptions he gathered during the interviews, that this school may have internalized the PLC process the most due to the fact that the building principal was a firm believer in the PLC process and hired faculty who were familiar, or firmly believed in the process.

School District C

The researcher contacted the Superintendent of School District C. The researcher had heard the Superintendent speak about PLCs at a conference and knew they had been operating a PLC for three years. The superintendent arranged for volunteers to be interviewed for the study. There were a total of eight educators interviewed at School District C. The Superintendent, Curriculum Director, and six teachers were interviewed. There were two representatives from all three levels (elementary, middle and high school) amongst the six teachers. The elementary teachers included a Kindergarten and

Title I teacher. The middle school educators included an 8th grade math and 7th grade science teacher. The high school level was represented by a math and history teacher. The interview lasted over three hours. The Superintendent, Curriculum Director, and elementary teachers were together for the first part of the interview. Two teachers from the high school joined the interview late and then were interviewed separately by the researcher. The middle school teachers came in for the last hour and were also interviewed separately. The interviews for School District C occurred on the last day of school for the 2009-2010 school year for School District C. Due to schedule conflicts and time constraints, no building principals were available to be interviewed at School Dsitrict C.

Collection and Analyzing of Data

Each of the interviews with educators was audiotaped. The researcher also made brief field notes. The audiotapes were transcribed and then analyzed. The researcher first assembled the responses from educators and placed them together into three categories (district administrator, principal, teacher). This was done because a district administrator, principal, and teacher would have different perceptions of PLCs because their role in regards to the operation of a PLC would be different.

After dividing the responses into the three subgroups, the researcher then examined the responses and identified responses that were relevant to the research questions involved in the study. These responses were highlighted with a different color according to which question they pertained to. These were collected and placed together, the subgroup (district administrator, principal, and teacher) were still identified, as was the district, to once again look for themes within districts and across the three districts.

The researcher then examined the collected responses that pertained to the research questions and began to look for themes within each question. These were highlighted with a different color. The themes were developed as the researcher examined the responses and began to see similarity amongst the responses in terms of both the subgroups and across all three districts.

Chapter 4

Data and Findings

The data for this multiple case study included tape recordings, interview transcripts, and researcher field notes. After returning from each interview, the researcher wrote notes or summaries of what had occurred during the interview process.

When all of the transcripts had been completed, the researcher began to code the responses of the participants. The first part of this process involved dividing the comments of the participants into three categories based upon the participants involved in the study. The three selected were comments of district personnel, building principals, and teachers. Obviously these three groups of people had different roles and responsibilities in a school district and it made sense to the researcher that their perceptions of PLCs would be different as well.

The researcher then began the process of examining the interview transcripts and marking responses of the participants that were related to the five research questions that were posed in the study. A response from an educator that related to one of the questions posed in the study was marked with a different color of highlighter (blue, green, orange, pink, yellow) in the transcripts. Each color represented one of the research questions posed in the study. After this process was completed, the researcher collected the remarks for each of the three personnel groups and arranged them by school, grade level, and which research question they pertained to. Elementary level educators were identified as A-1, B-1, or C-1. The letter referred to School District A, B, or C. Middle level educators were identified as A-2, B-2, or C-2. High School educators were identified as A-3, B-3, or C-3.

One of the urban districts selected informed the researcher that district surveys of teacher and administrator perceptions of PLCs had been given the previous two years. This was given to the researcher during the interview. Student achievement data on a district/building level was also supplied to the researcher by some of the participants. Achievement data was also available on the Nebraska Department of Education website.

District Administrator Comments

There were a total of 12 comments made by district administrators of the three school districts involved in the study regarding how they learned about PLCs. In all three school districts, most of the initial information that districts learned about PLCs came from district office personnel attending a workshop on PLCs, or discovering the concept of PLCs while doing professional reading. The district personnel shared the information they had gathered and proposals were developed. All three districts involved in the study decided to implement the PLC concepts and work of Rick DuFour, Becky DuFour and Robert Eaker. Their book, "Whatever it Takes" was the blueprint for the action that was taken (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). School District C initially began their PLC implementation with the DuFour method, but experienced difficulties and decided to switch to WFSGs developed by Carlene Murphy and Dale Lick. The Superintendent of School District C learned about their work with WFSGs while attending an Excellence in Education Conference in Lincoln, NE where Carlene Murphy was the keynote speaker.

The district administrator comments regarding how schools learned about PLCs were important in terms of answering the first research question of where educators learned about PLCs. In all three districts, the decision to proceed with the PLC process

was made by personnel in the district office, or in the case of School District C, the

District Superintendent. The responses given indicated that district office personnel or

administrators learned of them or read about them. They explored the idea further, and

then developed proposals for their boards of education. While the building principal and

teacher comments were not entirely overlooked, most of them indicated that it was a

district decision to proceed and they learned about PLCs from activities conducted by the

district.

Impact on Professional Development Perceptions

The perceptions of educators in the three districts involved in the study were that

PLCs were having an impact on professional development.

Table 1

Number of Participant Comments Regarding the Impact of PLCs on Professional

Development

Participant Role	Number of Comments
District Administrator	15
Principal	22
Teacher	95

There were 132 comments that the researcher noted that participants made

regarding the impact of PLCs on the professional development of teachers. The

comments from teachers greatly outnumbered the comments from district administrators

and principals because teachers composed the majority of the participants in the study.

Being teachers also meant they were the ones most affected by professional development

activities and obviously would be the ones most qualified to judge the impact of PLCs on professional development.

Regarding the impact that PLCs had on professional development, some of the educators in the study said,

> I think they've helped me be a better teacher because it has exposed me to someone else's teaching style and exposed me to someone else's planning and instruction. And so, it has definitely helped me grow because I'm not isolated in my own little world without ever talking to someone else and I think that's part of the middle school philosophy is for us to collaborate. And even they way our building is set up in pods, a social studies teacher, math teacher, English teacher, science teacher, well that's fine in that pod, but with PLCs it forces me to get out of my own little pod and go across the hallway and see other people in the building and collaborate with them. So it really helps me grow. (Middle School Teacher)

> Administrator: I think that when grade level teams or content specific teams or vertical teams have the opportunity to look at umm, what, what's most essential for kids to know and show evidence of knowing. And then, they look at that evidence. They clearly see where gaps in learning occur, and that they can respond sooner to student than they, than we had in the past. And they've done, they do that as a team. They no--. Teachers no longer do that in isolation. They do that as a team. So, they respond when kids are doing well, and they respond when kids are struggling and the other thing associated with that is that on every team I'm an expert in something, but I'm not an expert in everything. And when you pool that expertise within a team you build the capacity of the entire team to respond to their own professional approach to development. (Director of School Improvement)

> Well, in a narrower sense umm, in that we as we're working together, I think each PLC meeting becomes an instance of some professional development. Umm, it is--. It's great when we work with teachers who are new to teaching, teachers who've been around a while, some of us a very long while. Umm, you know, as we talk and get ideas from one another I think that's been helpful. And so, I think that increases professional development. It's just on a more, oh, a smaller scale, but very important scale. (High School Teacher)

Impact on School Improvement Perceptions

The perceptions of the educators involved in this study were that PLCs were having an impact on school improvement efforts in the three districts.

Table 2

Number of Participant Comments Regarding the Impact of PLCs on School Improvement

Participant Role	Number of Comments
District Administrator	10
Principal	23
Teacher	56

There were a total of 89 comments made by educators during the course of the interviews that were related to the impact that PLCs had on school improvement efforts in the three selected schools. Once again, the larger number of comments made by teachers was due to the larger proportion of teachers involved in the study compared to district administrators and principals. Regarding the impact of PLCs on school improvement, the educators stated,

> I think it's been great. Umm, when I, when I started here when I came from another district before I came here. So, I have a little bit of, you know, I've had a different experience in a different setting there, but what the biggest thing I noticed was a unified goal setting. It felt like, you know, everybody's on the same track. We all are working towards a goal that we're going to meet by the end of the year. Umm, so that was good for me feeling more like we had unified, structured plan time as a grade level where we were going to all meet and work towards the same goal.(Elementary Teacher)

> Well, there's really been a shift, and last year with the last year of the cycle for school improvement in Lincoln public schools, and it was our first year. So, we kind of drew a bye that year which was nice, because we had plenty of other things. And we did actually start gathering a lot of data and working on a profile. Now, this year is really year one. But what I see is those overarching goals, and then PLCs. That's the driving force. That's our action plan. That's that whole section. And I have all of it documented from every grade level with their short-term goals, with their long-term goals, and what they've been doing. (High School Principal)

> This is the first cycle where we've attached a professional development to the school improvement plan, and we also have a parent engagement plan. So, we

have all three plans that integrate. And the whole faculty study groups are just a piece of all of those plans.(Superintendent)

Impact on Student Achievement Perceptions

The perceptions of educators in all three districts were that PLCs were having an impact on student achievement.

Table 3

Number of Participant Comments Regarding the Impact of PLCs on Student Achievement

Participant Role	Number of Comments
District Administrator	15
Principal	20
Teacher	39

In regards to the impact of PLCs on student achievement, a total of 74 comments were recorded by the researcher. Many of the educators involved in the study perceived that PLCs were having an effect on student achievement. There were perceptions offered by educators that student achievement had increased. However, the researcher did not find any hard evidence to draw the conclusion that this was a fact. Some educators in the study stated,

> I think, you know, it's hard to say would this, you know, would this class of kids not be where they are having not done the PLC, but I can't imagine that they--. Like, I can't imagine that this didn't affect them in a positive way. (Elementary Principal)

> Oh yeah. I think it makes people, I think it holds you more accountable to student learning. I mean, I think a lot of times when I think of when I first got into teaching there were a lot of things that seemed very subjective like well, I think they're getting it. You know, you just didn't always have or know how to look at that data and use it effectively, and I think PLCs help do that with the different

types, formative assessment, summative assessment, looking at your different assessments. Which ones drive instructions? Which ones are just for data purposes, and using that to help you to help kids. (Elementary Teacher)

Yes, we have had a definite effect on student achievement. Umm, I can't say always, it's hard to determine when you're doing lots of good things. It's hard to determine which one affected student achievement the most. Umm, but I would say there's, you know, we definitely recognized increases that are in achievement, and we think that PLCs are one impact that's taken place. (Elementary Principal)

The three preceding comments were typical of most of the comments made regarding the impact of PLCs on student achievement. There was very little direct evidence offered by educators in the interviews that PLCs were having an impact on student achievement, but educator's perceptions were that they had.

Why PLCs were Effective Perceptions

Toward the end of each interview, educators were asked the question, "What makes PLCs effective?

Table 4

Number of Participant Comments Regarding the Impact of PLCs on Why PLCs Were Effective

Participant Role	Number of Comments
District Administrator	8
Principal	15
Teacher	52

There were a total of 75 comments made by participants recorded by the researcher in regards to the effectiveness of PLCs. The district administrators made 8 comments in regard to the question, principals provided 15 comments, and teachers once

again made up the majority of the comments with 52. Regarding what made PLCs

effective, educators stated,

> I think that what made it in School A is we forced the hand of people using data. I think as a former teacher in the early 90's I didn't use data to make decisions and I think this focuses people to do that. (Curriculum Director)

> It's, and it's not just collaborating for the sake of collaborating. It's a focused collaboration. So, you're centered around a goal. You're centered around student saving. You're centered around strategies to improve student achievement. No, I--. There's a lot of keen collaboration that can take place in the schools, but it might be talking about the next field trip or how we're going to handle lunch tomorrow. Those aren't the same sorts of collaboration as you find in a PLC. It is focused on student achievement. (Elementary Principal)

> I think I'm better at what I do because of it. Because I've had those opportunities to collaborate and think in terms of these aren't just my kids, but they're our kids, and what can we do. Remember to keep focused on who's succeeding, who's not succeeding, what can we do to make it happen? So I know I'm definitely better at what I do because of PLCs. (Elementary Teacher)

Themes

Within the Research Questions

The researcher examined the comments made by educators and then looked for

and found several themes within those comments. The first research question, "Where

did Nebraska educators learn about PLCs?" was not particularly conducive to a number

of themes. It was pretty clear from the responses given by educators where they had

learned about PLCs. Emphasis was placed upon the district administrator responses

because in the case of all three districts, it was a "top down" implementation process for

PLCs. A group or individual learned about PLCs by attending a conference or doing

professional reading and the idea spread and ultimately proposals were developed.

Within Professional Development Responses

As the researcher examined the educator responses that were related to

perceptions on professional development, six themes emerged from the data. Each of

these themes were identified with a different colored highlighter by the researcher. The

six themes were: (a) collaboration, (b) novice teacher professional development,

(c) teacher learning, (d) data awareness and application, (e) curriculum/assessment/

instruction improvement, and (f) professional development activities being more

organized and focused.

Within School Improvement Responses

There were four themes found as the researcher examined the responses of

educators that pertained to the research question regarding perceptions of effects on

school improvement efforts within each school. Once again, each of these themes were

identified with a different colored highlighter in the responses. The four themes

emerging from the data were: (a) more focus and organization in school improvement

efforts, (b) increased use of data in school improvement efforts, (c) change of educator

thought process about school improvement, and d) vehicle theme—PLCs were a vehicle

to carry out school improvement activity.

Within Student Achievement Responses

The researcher examined the student achievement responses by educators and

concluded there were four themes that emerged from the data. Each of these themes was

identified with a different colored highlighter in the responses. The four themes that

emerged were: (a) achievement on assessments, (b) data examination on assessments,

(c) collaboration, and (d) consistency. The consistency theme was most common in the

two urban schools participating in the study. Several comments were made by educators in the two urban districts regarding the marked improvement in consistency in curriculum, instruction, and grading at their schools which they attributed to PLCs.

Within the Reasons for Effectiveness Responses

There were three themes identified by the researcher in the responses given by educators as to why they thought PLCs were effective. These themes were once again identified by highlighting them. The three identified were: (a) changing the climate or culture of the school, (b) collaboration, and (c) increased awareness and use of data.

Responses

From Educators—First Heard

In regard to the first research question of where educators first heard about PLCs, the researcher decided to separate the responses of the three districts participating in the study. This was done because each of the districts had a different path they took to implementation and in one case, a different model of PLCs was adopted.

From School A Educators

School District A was one of the urban districts that participated in the study. The curriculum director at School District A was heavily involved in bringing PLCs to the district. She first heard about it when their Educational Service Unit offered an institute regarding PLCs in February of 2005. The institute was a two-day workshop with Rick and Becky DuFour and representatives from each of the district's buildings, (an administrator from each building was required to go), as well as selected faculty. Following the institute, the district decided to implement PLCs and began development of a school board proposal to do so. The school board approved the proposal in the

spring of 2005. The curriculum director also had attended a conference and learned

about the Whole-Faculty-Study-Group concept developed by Murphy, but the DuFour

model was ultimately implemented. The following comments were made by the

curriculum director regarding the reasons for going along with the DuFour Model.

> We really felt like DuFour's focused on the assessment piece of it and data and it wasn't just, umm a whole group looking at different scenes. It was, we wanted teachers specifically together who were teaching specifically the same thing so there were common formative assessments so that we can measure apples to apples instead of something else . . . and I also, really became a believer in the DuFours because of the success that DuFour had himself and his wife, but specifically at a high school. I'm a former high school teacher and former high school assistant principal, and I think high school folks are the hardest to change.

The three principals at School A were already employed or just starting

employment with the district when the district decided to implement PLCs. All three

attended a conference sponsored by the district. The district brought the DuFours in and

held a two-day conference that all three principals attended. Many of the teachers

interviewed at School A also mentioned this conference. All of the administrators and

teachers in the district were invited to attend the conference.

The majority of the teachers heard about PLCs when the district invited them to

attend the conference. Three of the teachers heard about PLCs during their

undergraduate work at UNL and Nebraska Wesleyan, but said it wasn't elaborated on

enough for them to fully understand them.

From School B Educators

School District B was the other urban district involved in the study. In regard to

the question of where educators from School District B first learned about PLCs, the

most insightful comments came from district office personnel. The person selected by

the researcher was the former Director of School Improvement for the district.

We had started researching what might be the best method or strategy for school improvement that would get teams of teachers together to focus on best practice—the impact of this practice on student learning. So, we had done some research and ran across Rick and Becky DuFour's work.

We noticed that the Solution Tree back then it was called something else. The Solution Tree had a summit where Rick and Becky DuFour were presenting. So, we went out there, listened to what they had to present, and then came back with a proposal for School District B.

Well, what we did is we modeled the DuFour team learning process, and we used DuFour's guiding questions.

The three building principals that were interviewed from School District B had somewhat different responses to the question of where they first heard about them. Their timelines were different and it was difficult for them to remember dates. The researcher concluded that it was approximately 2005 when the first information and training regarding PLCs happened for the principals.

The researcher found it interesting and notable that two of the principals attended a HOPE Conference in the middle of the decade and at this conference, School District A presented and shared their experiences with PLCs. It showed that School District A was perhaps one of the first schools in Nebraska to start PLCs. The more interesting aspect to the researcher was once again the power of collaboration and sharing with other educators was one of the cornerstones of PLCs. One district sharing their experiences with administrators in another district led to a district-wide initiative. The elementary principal in the study from School District B stated:

In 2004, 2005 I guess, we had the HOPE Conference here and it was at that conference that School District A shared their experience with PLCs. And I think that planted the seed with School District B that they might be a direction that we would want to go. And it really came from administrators and teachers saying yes we want to do this. So the following year there was a pilot in the district and few schools started trying to figure out a way to study PLCs and as we looked at the barriers, time seemed to be the biggest one. So, then as a district, they moved

forward with finding the early release days and so that it was the following year, so I think that would have been probably around 2007 and 2008 when we started, or 2006-2007 . . . and then we went from there and made it to district-wide initiative.

The middle school principal interviewed from School B also mentioned the HOPE Conference as when she first heard about PLCs. She was asked by a district office person to attend another conference the DuFour's spoke at which she attended with the principal of another high school in the district. These two schools then piloted the PLCs for School District B.

The high school principal for School District B did mention attending workshops and reading literature from the DuFours, Eaker, McREL, and Reeves. He did not mention any dates or workshops in particular.

The eight teachers who were asked about where they first heard about PLCs had the same basic response to the question. They heard about it when it became a district-wide initiative. One respondent heard about them while teaching in another state, but it was informal and only done by members of his department.

One teacher commented and the researcher once again found it notable, that School District B had teachers from School District A come to their school and share their experiences with them regarding PLCs. The collaboration piece of PLCs was going from district offices down into the building and classroom level.

From School C Educators—First Heard

School C was the only rural school that was involved in the study. It was also unique in that it was the only school in the study that was not currently using the DuFour model. School C was using the WFSG approach. The superintendent of the district had heard about WFSGs while attending an Excellence in Education Conference in Lincoln.

The researcher had also attended this conference and had heard Carlene Murphy speak about WFSGs.

The district had tried to implement the DuFour's model and do PLCs. They did not have success with it. The researcher came to the conclusion based on interview responses, that scheduling and some organization and leadership struggles by the person responsible for implementation of the PLCs led to its demise. That person is no longer with the district. The current superintendent of the district led the district to the idea and implementation of WFSGs. Here is her reasoning for doing so:

> Where we first got the idea to go with Whole Faculty Study Groups was at Excellence in Ed. Conference, that's sponsored by NDE, and that was probably about three years ago. And that was Carlene Murphy who presented and that form of PLCs seemed to fit the direction that School C was going. School C had implemented PLCs and it would have been more the DuFour method, the philosophy, the year before, and for some reason we went with Friday afternoons once a month which was not a good time to do that. And so, we kind of set ourselves up for failure when we did that, and we knew we needed to make some major changes with our Professional Learning Communities. The Whole-Faculty-Study-Group used data, used student data, and this is with small groups, and dealt mostly with student learning and student achievement, and that's what we were really interested in. So, it was a process of hearing about them through just reading and then finding the right match for School C through a conference.

> We felt like we needed something very specific and structured. When we did the DuFour model, it was more open, reading, discussion, and we just felt, you know, that was great, but we wanted something that was really more structured and dealt with students and issues that we had. And so, with Whole-Faculty Study Groups, we did base lines, we did action plans, we gathered data, and then the teachers could work on interventions that were appropriate interventions together that fit their classrooms and what they were doing in the classrooms so it was more relevant. It was more specific and guided I guess than DuFour's method of, more of a philosophy type method.

There were no principals interviewed from School C. The Curriculum Director of the district was one of the educators interviewed at School C. Her responses led the

researcher to believe that the superintendent led the learning process about WFSG. Her

comments were:

> And I remember her (Superintendent) coming back and being so excited. I think
> all of us had some background in DuFour, but the Whole-Faculty Study-Groups,
> she really seemed to think would be the fit . . . we got off to a bad start with our
> first set of PLCs, . . . that was the the death of PLCs. I mean you couldn't use that
> term around here. So, we needed something that was different in name and in
> structure, in procedure and that fit for us.

All of the teachers at School District C were in agreement that they heard about

WFSG from the district administration, primarily the Superintendent. School District C

is small enough that this undertaking could be accomplished by the central office and

would get considerable "buy-in" from the educators in the district. The researcher had

heard the Superintendent and Curriculum Director give a presentation at Administrator

Days in Kearney several years ago. Obviously, they had led the process. The interview

process at School District C had the Superintendent and Curriculum Director go first,

along with two other teachers. The remaining teachers interviewed filtered in as the

interviewing went on. The researcher did not go back in the remaining interviews and

ask the question of where they first heard about PLCs because it was obvious who had

first heard about them and informed them. One teacher did comment on the switch to

WFSGs:

> We needed some structure instead of some vague idea of going out and finding
> something to use, and then, what do you do with it? So, at least we know what to
> do with the information we get now, and the feedback we get from the principals
> on the Whole-Faculty-Study-Group model where the teachers keep logs and get
> feedback from the principals I think is really important too.

In Regards to Professional Development

The thesaurus of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database

refers to professional development as, "activities to enhance professional career growth."

Activities may include, "individual development, continuing education, and inservice

education, as well as curriculum writing, peer collaboration, study groups, and peer

coaching or mentoring."

By this definition, the researcher argues that a PLC is a form of professional

development. The educators participating in the study gave ample evidence of

conducting many of the activities listed above. There was even a quote from one on the

respondents that gave support to this conclusion:

> I think each PLC meeting becomes an instance of some professional development.
> It's great when we work with teachers who are new to teaching, teachers who've
> been around awhile, some of us a very long while. You know, as we talk and get
> ideas from one another I think that's been helpful. And so, I think that increases
> professional development. It's just more, on a smaller scale, but very important
> scale . . . and then we have to learn from one another and you know, help each
> other and we can all get help from each other and that's great. (High School
> Teacher)

The researcher was looking for an impact, a positive effect on professional

development. Were educators learning more from conducting PLCs than past

professional development activities? There was evidence uncovered by the researcher

that more time had been devoted to professional development activities in all three

districts. This was documented because all three districts had scheduled time for teachers

to meet on a regular basis to conduct professional development in their PLCs.

Two items regarding professional development seemed to be prominent in many

of the responses that gave the researcher the impression that PLCs were having an

impact. First, teachers were taking more ownership in their own professional

development. They were directing the agendas and activities of the PLCs.

> At the district level, we've had some phenomenal professional development from
> the DuFour's..But I think at the building level, it's changed how we do
> professional development. Instead of having one speaker and just sit, what we

want is for it to become more personal, and really meet the needs of teams. (Elementary Principal)

They clearly see where gaps in learning occur, and that they can respond sooner to students than they, than we had in the past. . . . They do that as a team. Teachers no longer do that in isolation. They do that as a team . . . and when you pool that expertise within a team, you build the capacity of the entire team to respond to their own professional approach to development. (Director of School Improvement)

I think it helps determine what the professional development needs of the teachers are. (Director of School Improvement)

I think we see the groups starting to understand what types of professional development they need. (Curriculum Director)

The other point that many educators made was that there was no longer the "one and done" approach to professional development. There was continuity in the professional development process and they were reaching the implementation phase with professional development initiatives. If there was a one or two day workshop, attendees were asked to report back to their PLCs about what they had learned. There were opportunities given for teachers to try new skills and apply new knowledge and report to their colleagues. In prior forms of professional development, there was often no follow-up or implementation on what was learned.

It's really the implementation phase of staff development. You know, and to me that's the most meaningful. You almost never get there with other forms of staff development . . . I just think it, it does become the function that you implement either a school improvement plan, staff development effort, or you know, all of those things that will provide improvement for student achievement. To me, it's the tool or the vehicle to get there. (Elementary Principal)

Many times what we've learned in staff development days then is carried and discussed in our PLCs. So, learning a new strategy or learning to deliver or identify an assessment, you know, that's learned during a staff development whether it's district or school, then the real application of that happens in a PLC. So it kind of comes to life then. (Elementary Principal)

I've mentioned several times to my colleagues, I would give up staff development learning days before I'd give up PLC time, because for me as principal, that's my most effective tool regarding staff development. (Elementary Principal)

Professional Development

Collaboration Theme

> *It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.*
> *–Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The theme of collaboration was very prominent amongst the responses by educators when asked about PLCs effects on professional development. There were 39 instances of teachers mentioning collaboration in their responses. Twenty-nine of those responses came from teachers, which is not surprising because they would be the ones doing the most collaborating and affected by it the most.

Leonard and Leonard (2003) defined teacher collaboration as "teachers working together in meaningful, job-embedded ways." Teacher collaboration was also defined as, "an interactive process that enables teachers with diverse expertise to work together as equals and engage in shared decision making toward mutually defined goals." (http://www.education.com)

Both of these definitions fit well with the PLC model. Collaboration was a theme mentioned throughout the responses of almost all of the educators interviewed. If the researcher had to pick one item that seemed to be the most responsible for making PLCs effective, it would be teachers collaborating.

The district administrators and principals mentioned collaboration. Many of them shared that they felt isolated and did not get the benefit of being able to collaborate with their colleagues.

I think it's improved instruction because from my own experience when I taught in a classroom and I was the only person in that classroom, I didn't get to share with other people. When I became an administrator, I got to observe other people, got to talk about instruction and improve my instruction. (Curriculum Director—School District A)

Teachers tend to teach in isolation, and this just provides that collaboration opportunity. (Curriculum Director—School Districts C)

You know this. We've gone years kind of letting teachers do their own thing. And so, the teaching that went on, or what you learned from the course was dependent on the teacher, and hopefully, it's not that way now . . . I think they've made us more collegial . . . I think that teachers are having time during the school day to talk to each other, to find out what's working, and I like that. I think that's effective. (High School Principal)

The comments made by teachers regarding the importance of collaboration on their professional development were numerous. There were a number of responses in which educators specifically used the term "collaboration" when talking about PLCs and professional development. Many of the responses referred to being able to share ideas or lessons with their colleagues and becoming a better teacher because of this opportunity.

PLCs force you--, Like I had no idea what was going on in their classrooms before PLCs. I didn't know when they were testing. I didn't know what their tests looked like. I didn't know how their kids performed on their tests. I mean, it was just like total separation and I think that PLCs can give you more confidence as a teacher. Like me knowing that another teacher and I can have the same test and we can compare data. It kind of reaffirms yourself as a teacher . . . I mean it just kind of gives you more confidence, which I liked. And at the other school I was at previously, it was like, I don't know where I'm going, I don't know where the other person is at." (Middle School Teacher)

I think they've helped me be a better teacher because it has exposed me to someone else's teaching style and exposed me to someone else's planning and instruction. And so, it has definitely helped me grow because I'm not isolated in my own little world without ever talking to someone else and I think that's part of the middle school philosophy is for us to collaborate. And even the way our building is set up in pods, a social studies teacher, a math teacher. English teacher, science teacher, well that's fine in that pod, but with PLCs, it forces me to get out of my own little pod and go across the hallway and see other people in the building and collaborate with them. So it really helps me grow. (Middle School Teacher)

You know, like some of the other people have already said, it really does help to talk other than just socially with your colleagues. And we all talk socially and hang out socially and that kind of thing, but to, you know, actually talk professionally about what we're doing, it forces you to do that. . . . So we're collaborating not only with our own building, but, you know in the middle schools, and then the middle schools will do the same with the elementary . . . before the WFSGs, I don't think we would have had that kind of interaction with each other. You just taught what you wanted. (High School Teacher)

I got many teaching ideas from other teachers that I still use today. Before you're kind of in your own room and you did your own thing and the person next door did their own thing, and now you do a lot of things together, and that's one thing I've liked. (High School Teacher)

Other teachers talked about the benefits of collaboration in terms of sharing the

workload to accomplish tasks that would not be possible to do if they were working in

isolation.

So we both kind of divided and conquered and then it was a great lesson that the kids learned and if she would of thought of that on her own, I mean, there would have been too much to do. But when you collaborate, then it's suddenly easy to tackle and then the kids really benefit. (Middle School Teacher)
Teaching can be a lonely job if you don't have that collaboration time with other teachers and we are so busy with everything that we have to do most of the time that we're not, on our own, most likely going to set that up . . . I think other schools, I know a school that I student taught in, I mean, they never—science teachers never collaborated on anything because they weren't given any time to do so . . . It was kind of sad. There were things they were missing out on. (Middle School Teacher)

Teachers Learning Theme

What are students learning and achieving as a result of what teachers are learning and doing in study groups?
—Carlene Murphy (2005, p. 13)

The above quote is the essential question that guides the WFSG process. The

researcher noticed the learning of teachers theme while examining their comments to

interview questions. Many of the learning theme comments in professional development

perceptions by teacher were closely tied to the collaboration theme. While there was

some overlap in the responses, the researcher treated the collaboration of teachers and the learning of teachers in regards to professional development as separate themes. Teachers often learned things from collaborating together, but the researcher saw enough difference to treat them as separate themes.

There was mention of resistance to PLCs by some of the educators in the schools that were interviewed. As one middle school principal stated, "Resistance comes from those who don't collaborate well, or are afraid to collaborate." In the researcher's opinion, the schools in the urban districts that were recommended for the study by district administrators were the ones with PLCs operating at the highest level, so you would come to the conclusion that there would be very little resistance in those schools to the PLC process. Resistance by an educator in a PLC group can reduce the collaboration and effectiveness of the group and teachers may not learn as much from each other. This was another reason for separating the themes of teacher collaboration and learning on the question of professional development.

Teachers initially had to learn how to work together in a PLC or WFSG. They had to learn how to collaborate. The perceptions of the educators in this study were that this process was well underway in all three districts. Once teachers have learned how to collaborate, they are ready to move on and begin learning from each other. The comments made by the district administrators and building principals confirmed this.

> And in some cases I saw growth in terms of adult learning that may not necessarily have equated to student achievement. And what I mean by that is adults were learning what they were, or learning from each other what they were implementing and how they implement it. But they also learned what worked and what didn't work, and as a result of that effort, they refined their instruction and that ultimately had an impact on student achievement. (Director of School Improvement)

We would like it to be the high level of professional development like Thomas Gusky has the five levels of evaluating. We'd like it to be to the point where it's the fourth and fifth level of changing teacher practices and ultimately improving student learning. So, those are our goals with the professional development. (Superintendent)

I also see our whole school community and all the teachers, and that's a piece that being a new school I want us to continue to grow with. That's how we've learned together and how we're comfortable challenging one another and asking questions. And not challenging in a threatening way, but in a growing way. Help me learn this, or this didn't work for me, or I see you doing this but I don't understand why you do that. Our next step is our "stretch culture" and that fourth question: "What do you do when he kids already get it?" And we have to get better at that. (Elementary Principal)

The researcher found a great deal of evidence that teachers were learning in their

PLCs and WFSGs. There was evidence of teachers learning new strategies from

teachers, learning how to incorporate new technology into their lessons, and even

switching classes with another teacher to capitalize on each other's strengths. There was

mention of more self-reflection by teachers as a result of their meetings.

I think some questions can develop in your head or sometimes we still need to learn . . . there's some instructional time that we've lost, but we're always trying to find time for that. It gives us the time to make our instruction better. So, in the end that's what it's about. (Elementary Teacher)

It helps you get ideas from each other . . . when we do get stumped, or not sure what to do for a student, we just don't leave it at that. You know, you continue to look for help, talk to different people. (Elementary Teacher)

It's a matter of communicating and talking with her and figuring out what that is. Is that something I can do? Do we need to switch classes for a day, and she teaches in my room and I teach in hers, so you know they get it. Besides, playing on strengths is changing my teaching. It allows me to see what I'm good at or what I'm not good at. You know, where I need help. (Elementary Teacher)

Not that I'm a bad teacher, but what can I do to make things better? So, I think it really helps you be more reflective and improve instruction for kids. . . . And I think the PLCs have allowed me to hopefully get some of their teaching traits that maybe I'm missing just from the ideas that we share, the strategies we share. (Elementary Teacher)

I guess as a teacher you're always learning and always changing and if you don't, well, it's probably a lot easier job than what I've done for the last 30 some years. You're always trying to think of ways that kids, that you can explain things to kids, because then they can learn more if they understand—you can build on that. (High School Teacher)

You might think about them on your own, but not—I think it does challenge you and sharpen you and make you aware of maybe deficiencies in areas that you need to improve in teaching, or that you can meet the needs of students that are, you know, you maybe were aware that they were struggling in. (High School Teacher)

I think the best way to learn how in teaching is to talk to other teachers and develop strategies. So I think it is very beneficial. (Middle School Teacher)

The researcher also noticed that many of the comments by teachers included the concept of the teachers learning more so their students could learn more. This is the major concept that Murphy and Lick's WFSG are built around.

New Staff Theme

One of the themes that emerged from the data gathered by the researcher was the impact of PLCs regarding the professional development of new staff. New staff should be considered as novice teachers or perhaps a more experienced educator just joining one of the three districts. The researcher did not ask specific questions regarding professional development on new staff members in the interviews, but found it interesting that eight responses regarding this theme mentioned the benefits of PLCs for new staff members.

We feel like it is pretty well ingrained in the culture of all the schools that we just need to continue now to train the new staff, and then we train new district singleton PLC leaders each year as well to just remind them of what our expectations are, what a good PLC looks like, what their role is as a singleton leader. (Curriculum Director)

I think what makes PLCs most effective is that you have different generations of teachers . . . she brought up an example. She's got a veteran in her group who's taught this for 30 some years..plus she comes in. So he kind of brings up a lot of the standards from the past, a lot of methods he's used. She's comes in more of the technology angle of what she's using with the SmartBoard or some of the data

tools she's using. So, you have a chance from different generations to share different sides of it. For your staff that's just coming in, it gives them a great mentoring of what, what is, you know, it's all essential, but what is the most essential to cover. What's the best way to get them to learn? What's the best instructional methods they need to employ? What is essential for all students to learn?(High School Principal)

I had about four "first years." First years are so hard, you know . . . basically you were handed the textbook and told, "have at it." I think with the model particularly, for any teachers, but particularly for new teachers, it's such a great way to kind of break them into the system, to make sure that they understand what the course objectives are, what the course goals are, and then to be with veteran teachers and pick their brains about what's working. I just think it's such a smooth transition for anybody who's leading a position. And you know, you can have veteran teachers who come to a new school, and it's like a first year. They're used to kids, but you know, they're using the curriculum for the first time, and you're figuring out all of those standards. And I just think it makes sense as a delivery to make sure that instruction is smooth and consistent. (High School Teacher)

My experience working with brand new teachers coming into the PLC community, they're very overwhelmed. You know, especially in the math. In the last six years when we have a new, brand new teacher coming out of college and they're coming into the PLC a lot of time they end up crying and bawling because it's overwhelming to them. You could just talk about formative assessments and data and objectives, and they're still just trying to figure out how to make it through that day . . . it gives them that opportunity to vent and to learn and to realize that everybody there is for them . . . I didn't have a mentor my first year teaching. So, when I look back, that PLC sure would have been great. (Middle School Teacher)

As a new teacher coming in . . . it did help to get an understanding of what was going on instead of just kind of floating around trying to figure it out for yourself and not knowing who to go to for answers. So, you got to meet with the different people, share ideas, and ask what to do. (Elementary Teacher)

The building principals and teachers at the urban districts really stressed the importance of PLCs for developing new staff members. The researcher also thought the mentoring comments were very important. Many schools have developed mentoring programs for their new staff members. Established PLCs at schools might be able to address this in a more effective way.

It was also interesting and noteworthy to listen to educators speak of wide ranges of age and experience levels in their PLC groups. Everyone in the group was learning something and everyone had something to contribute to the group. Younger teachers had newer methods and utilized technology more. Veteran teachers had tried and proven strategies to share with their younger colleagues. None of this learning would be going on if there was not an opportunity given for teachers to sit down and do this.

Data Theme

There were 16 responses that mentioned data being used by educators. Many of the responses were focused on an improvement by educators to work with data. They were more comfortable utilizing it after working with it more in the PLC groups. This was especially evident in the responses from veteran educators who were interviewed. Educators had progressed to not only looking at data, but using the results to improve instruction. Instead of teachers "believing" or "thinking" students had mastered a task or concept, they were examining data to see if it was really true, and if students hadn't shown proficiency in what they were taught, teachers were adjusting their instruction.

> Our teachers in the past have never been very thorough with their data, and so now, we're really kind of getting into, like professional, they're looking into best practices through data. (High School Principal)

> I think that data--that piece that I talked about that I was weak in, I've taken back to the classroom. So being inspired to say look this is, you know, what goal we met in reading, or this is, these are our math outcomes, or this is where we want to be, has definitely sparked the kid's awareness because we have a big, huge, data board. (Elementary Teacher)

> I think PLCs have kind of forced us as educators to take a look at data much more closely than what we used to. And I think that is maybe a response to No Child Left Behind, but good or bad, it is the current situation we are in. That's one piece that I see here at this school compared to what was before, compared to what we have now with PLCs, is sitting down with a common assessment and talking about chunking items on the assessment, did the kids meet these items and

do they not meet these items and what are you doing better and how can I help my students be more proficient. That's something that's really been a positive out of the PLCs. (Middle School Teacher)

This year we implemented a whole new structure to our PLC with how we were doing our data analysis and it's really become much more productive this year and it's been phenomenal for the kids too. (Middle School Teacher)

It's really nice because it allows to really look at the data and where kids are, and then to use that data to guide our instruction. I think you do that as a teacher naturally, or you try to, but it really helps to kind of pinpoint. You're more aware and conscious of the data that you are collecting, and I think collecting what's going to be important, what's going to guide instruction. (Elementary Teacher)

I think it's a positive effect, which I think I've kind of already said, but you know, you change your teaching based on how kids perform based on the data, what you see in the data . . . if I've taught and those kids still are getting it, then it's something that I'm doing that I need to change. . . . It just makes you more reflective. You have to be more aware of the data. I mean it's very kind of black and white. What do your numbers show? There is no, "Well, I think they're getting it." You look at the numbers, and you make decisions based on your data. Your data kind of drives what you need to do next. (Middle School Teacher)

I start looking at data more. I started using formative assessments more. You start realizing to evaluate your lesson with using data, versus, "Well, it looks like the students all paid attention." But when you really look at what they learned in your PLC and with other teachers, you're like, "Oh, they really didn't learn." PLCs opened our eyes for that. . . . That PLC gives you an opportunity to look at the data and that student achievement to whether or not what you did works. Just because you did a group activity doesn't mean all the kids are going to learn, just because somebody said in the book that that's what is going to help them learn. (Middle School Teacher)

One word that the researcher heard in many of the responses was accountability. This was not treated as a separate theme, but was closely aligned to the data theme. All three districts had educators that talked about accountability, and the data that they worked with increased the accountability of their work in PLCs. Teachers were developing professionally in the use of data, changing their instruction because of it, and meeting the expectations that were placed upon them.

Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction Theme

Another theme that the researcher identified in regards to professional

development was that educators were much more aware of, and talked frequently about

their use of PLC time to work on curriculum and assessment issues and using them to

help improve instruction. The two urban schools were somewhat different in that they

have used a great deal of their PLC time to make courses consistent for students. What is

meant by that is consistency is both the material presented to students (curriculum) and

the assessments that are given to them. For example, there may be five or six teachers

that teach 10th grade English in one of the district's high schools. The schools

interviewed used a large portion of PLC time in those first years to try and make sure that

despite the teacher a student had for a class, they had the same basic experience as a

student in another class with a different teacher.

> We really felt like the DuFour's focused on the assessment piece of it and data, it
> wasn't just a whole group looking at different scenes. We wanted teachers
> specifically together who were teaching specifically the same thing, so there were
> common formative assessments, so that we can measure apples to apples instead
> of something else. (Curriculum Director)

> It's professionals meeting and discussing a common course and common goals
> and just keeping ourselves intact. Where are kids are, you know, if you're taking
> algebra here at this high school, it should be the same guidelines, not necessarily
> the same exact course, but the same guidelines throughout. (High School
> Teacher)

Many other comments by educators talked about the importance of curriculum

and the impact that PLCs and WFSGs were having on it. School District C spent an

entire year reviewing and updating its curriculum. This is tedious and time-consuming

work that does not often get done and get done well. The educators involved with the

study were very appreciative of being given the time to do this and the importance of it

and benefits to their professional development were evidenced.

> I think when grade level teams or content specific teams or vertical teams have the opportunity to look at what's most essential for kids to know and show evidence of knowing. . . . They clearly see where gaps in learning occur, and they can respond sooner to students than they, than we had in the past. (Director of School Improvement)

> When we started this we knew we had some definite district needs that we needed to align curriculum. That we needed to look at the new state standards that were coming down. And so, we used WFSGs to do that, and that's why it worked pretty well to start with to go to the grade level groups or subject level groups depending on which building and level you were. (Curriculum Director)

> Well, my perception is that we, we really couldn't live without them at this point. As we start to look into the accountability era of having things be measured out as to what our curriculum standards are, and as far as to what we set our graduation standards. Our teachers have to get together. They have to discuss what's essential, what's important for them. They also have to select what, how to, what's the best way to measure students. In the past, it was kind of left up to the individual teacher to kind of decide how much, how far I go, and how much I do. And now it's together. People are deciding what's essential, and what's the best way to measure it. (High School Principal)

> It's allowed us to talk more about standard-based grading, standard-based curriculum, and presentation of that curriculum, and then, consistent grading, so that again, it's not different class to class. And we couldn't have done that five years ago, we could not have a regular grade scale. We had probably 35 grade scales in this school. So, yeah, I think some of that comes from the talk in PLCs. (High School Principal)

> It changed me in that I really did get to see the scaffolding that we wanted to have in place for 9th grade students to move successfully through the AP Lit. Comp. their senior year. I guess I looking at that I really feel that I have become a better teacher, because now I'm more aware of what the other grade levels do . . . We're aligning I think our activities so that we can see the growth, the improvement in the students. The other thing that we've done in our PLC is we're looking at terminology, and that is important that we're using the same language. (High School Teacher)

> We aligned curriculum with all the state standards seeing what we were missing, and that helped us a lot. We got a lot of work done. (High School Teacher)

It gave us an opportunity to figure out who's going to be teaching what areas in science. It was kind of a curriculum review so that we could make sure that we were hitting everything we needed to hit for the standards, but we weren't teaching it three times and we were missing out on something else. (Middle School Teacher)

I felt my first year at math at the middle school, it was, I think essential that I was able to meet with the other math teachers. And for the same reasons, you know, curriculum, making sure it's aligned, that type of thing. I was in charge of 24 STARS tests, and so, I really needed to make sure that I was able to align mine in a way that I could get all of those in by May 1st. So, it was I think vital to my job that I was able to communicate weekly with that group. (Middle School Teacher)

The impact of PLCs on the professional development of educators in regards to curriculum, assessment and instruction was evident based upon the perceptions of educators. Individual teachers were not reviewing curriculum, groups of teachers were. In School District C this was alluded to, and "gaps" in the curriculum or "redundancy" were identified and eliminated. School District B created a common grading scale among it's PLC groups at the high school level. School District A had more consistency at the middle and high school level on its curriculum and assessments in its courses. Parents don't call as often requesting a certain teacher for one of their child's classes because they are getting the same educational experience, regardless of the teacher.

Teachers were able to address state standards better. They had other professionals to seek advice from and make sure they were aligning their curriculum and instruction to those standards. Many of the tasks accomplished in the area of curriculum, assessment, and instruction by PLCs could not have been done individually. You need to know what students have already been taught when they come in your classroom and you can't know without talking to teachers at different levels.

Many of the ESU's in the State of Nebraska did a similar process when they got teachers from different districts together to align curriculum and design assessments for

STARS. One could make the argument that this was a form of PLCs. Teachers got together and collaborated, working in the area of curriculum, assessments and instruction. There was some remarkable work done by educators during this process and it is another example of the power of collaboration and what can happen when teachers work together.

Organized and Focused Theme

> *I think what the group noticed this year, and it really sounds obvious, but*
> *when you focus on something, it gets better.*
> *(Middle School Teacher)*

Many of the comments made by educators during the interviews regarding professional development and PLCs referred to the fact that the professional development activities that were now in place with PLCs were more focused and organized.

The researcher discovered that before PLCs, many of the educators interviewed experienced a great deal of "one and done" professional development. A speaker would be brought in to introduce a new initiative in the district or a building, but schools never reached the implementation phase of professional development.

Another perception was professional development was more focused on the district level. Schools involved in the study were not committing as many resources to training, workshops, etc. if the proposed activities were not tied to district goals and objectives.

> Well, prior to PLCs or WFSGs, we had a lot of just spot here, there type—I think
> it's helped us become more organized and more focused and I think it will
> continue to do so. . . . Another thing that we'll be doing along with all of that is
> when people ask to go they get these flyer in the mail and say, "Oh that sounds
> like fun, or that would be a great thing"—like not—"Really like to learn more
> about that." We're probably going to say no. We're really focused on our goal.
> We're really focused on our professional development plan. And even though
> something would be great, it might be a bit of a diversion. It might be taking our
> resources and spending them in a place where we don't want to spend them. So,

we're trying to be very focused with our professional development. (Superintendent)

It's (professional development) got to deal with what we're talking about now. It must, you know, if everyone's going to go to something fun, like a coach's clinic, then not very much anymore, it's got to be stressing vocabulary, reading comprehension. So, it's really driven towards that. And I think they will probably tell you no if it's something else. If it's something where you go and draw some nice pictures and say I could maybe use that. Probably not so. (High School Teacher)

I think our district is maybe focused more on, I mean who do we send training to, or who we bring in to train. It's more focused now on our school improvement goal. (Middle School Teacher)

I think anybody that they bring down to talk to us there is a purpose in terms of what we're trying to reach in our WFSGs and our school improvement for bringing them in. Over the years that I've been a teacher, it seems like I've been to workshops that schools have had and so on, and you get there and think, "Why did they bring this guy in to talk and show for that?" Because what he's talking about might work fine where he's at in inner city Omaha, but where I've got eight 7th graders it really doesn't apply to what I'm trying to do here. I think it's made our in-services more valuable to us in terms of trying to reach a goal. (Middle School Teacher)

It's really the implementation phase of staff development. You know, and to me that's the most meaningful. You almost never get there with other forms of staff development . . . I just think it, it does become the function that you implement either a school improvement plan, staff development effort, or you know, all of those things that will provide improvement for student achievement. It's to me, it's the tool or the vehicle to get there. (Elementary Principal)

Again I think it's more consistent. I don't think staff development is necessarily seen as kind of a one shot deal where you do it at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. I think with PLC work it's weekly, and it's more . . . I hope feels to teachers that it's more course driven and more applicable than kind of doing staff development on a kind of hit and miss situation. (High School Principal)

It's kind of taking what you're supposed to be doing by the end of the year and breaking it down into little two week segments and kind of taking baby steps to get to that final goal of where they're supposed to be. (Elementary Teacher)

Another factor that appeared to make professional development activities more

organized and focused was that teachers were taking responsibility for their own

professional development. They were identifying what they felt they needed in terms of

professional development in their PLC teams and communicating this to their building

administrators and district offices.

> And the other thing I like about it is, the teachers are driving—teachers are
> driving their own staff development because that's happening week to week in
> their PLCs. I hope they would say that it's more applicable to them. (High
> School Principal)

> What things do you want more training in? At least then someone who sat for
> more than one PLC said, "Oh, I'm hearing a lot of concern about technology. So,
> I do think they kind of direct and guide us. (Elementary Teacher)

> I think sometimes the focus can get lost in what you really need to be focusing on.
> And so, through PLCs, it really helps to identify your needs, what the needs are,
> and address those needs. (Middle School Teacher)

The combination of focusing on specific professional development needs and

concentrating resources on providing for those needs in order to reach district goals has

made an impact on the three districts involved in this study based on perceptions of

educators. PLCs and WFSGs have given teachers a voice (shared decision making) in

terms of what their needs are. It has also given them a better opportunity to implement

the things they have learned because their development is "chunked," much like the

lessons they teach their students. The professional development practice of "one and

done" has gone away and been replaced with a much more effective vehicle for

professional development. Educators are now having regularly scheduled time to

conduct professional development activities as a result of PLCs.

School Improvement Perceptions

> *The capacity to function as a Professional Learning Community has been*
> *described as the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school*
> *improvement*
>   *—Rick DuFour 1998 (p. xi)*

One of the research questions of this study was, "What were the perceptions of these Nebraska educators about the impact of PLCs on school improvement in their schools?" The researcher asked respondents if they had noticed any effects that PLCs had on school improvement efforts in their school. There were 55 responses that the researcher related to PLCs having an impact on school improvement. There were four themes that the researcher identified while examining the responses. The first was that PLCs had made the process more focused and organized for educators. The second was that there was an increased use of data by educators in the process due to PLCs. The third was that PLCs had changed the thinking or mindset of educators in regards to the school improvement process. Making the process more meaningful and manageable was something that the researcher noticed as a subtheme to the change in thinking about school improvement. The fourth theme was that PLCs were the "vehicle" by which school improvement was done.

Organized and Focused Theme

School improvement activities conducted by the three districts in this study were impacted positively by the PLCs implemented in the three study districts. There was evidence, based on educators' perceptions, of more organization and focus in regards to school improvement activities.

Based on the conversations with educators, the researcher concluded that one of the reasons for this improved focus and organization was that PLCs were meeting regularly and time was given to teachers to work on school improvement activities. A number of educators talked about previous experiences with school improvement and a lack of communication on a regular basis at the district level about district goals for the

process. PLCs once again served as a "vehicle" for school improvement activities,

providing time and a formal schedule for teachers to meet.

> I think the difference is there is time set aside, specific time set aside with a specific goal and focus. It's a formalized process now, whereas prior to this, it wasn't a formalized process. (High School Teacher)

> I've seen like School A-1 is a great example of really tying it into their school improvement process. I think it's significant because they see a tie in. We're trying to connect all the dots for them so that they see it can be very much part of it. (Curriculum Director)

> This is the first cycle where we've attached professional development to the school improvement plan, and we also have a parent engagement plan. So, we have all three plans that integrate. And the Whole-Faculty-Study-Groups are just a piece of all those plans. (Superintendent)

There was also evidence that school were doing commendable work in terms of

getting teachers to align their PLC goals with the school improvement district goal.

> It definitely has had an effect. We umm, have actually made a concentrated effort to really align ourselves to the district SIP plan, our own school SIP plan, and then what our PLC goals are as well as staff evaluation goals. So, you might find a teacher at our school that's working on the SIP planning on the action team with the SIP plan, and their PLC is working on a goal that aligns with that as well as you could align that back to the district SIP plan. You even could find that might be their professional goal for staff evaluation. So, for instance, an example of that, this year our school wide goal to increase reading levels of students. We had a school wide measure. So, every student was assessed using the (inaudible) text leveling system. And so, every student's had that measure done three times a year. There's also an increasing of reading achievement goal in the district strategic plan. It's also one of our SIP plan goals. And so, PLCs determine how they were going to measure that their grade level, and what type of progress they wanted to see from their students. And so, we did school wide graphs. We did grade bubble graphs. We did individual student progress. And then you would find that many staff had that as well as their staff evaluation goal that everyone in their class would achieve a particular reading level. And so, all of those really tie together, and any time you can align it and make it make sense there's more focus on the school improvement effort as well as action takes place. So, those are big factors on our school improvement. (Elementary Principal)

> What we, what we said was not negotiable. In other words, these were the non-negotiables that the school improvement must be aligned to the overarching

district goal. And that it had to be focused on the academic needs of their kids. (Director of School Improvement)
I came from another district before I came here. So, I have a little bit of, you know, I've had a different experience in a different setting there, but the biggest thing I noticed was a unified goal setting. It felt like everybody's on the same track. We all are working towards a goal that we're going to meet by the end of the year. So, that was good for me feeling more like we had unified, structured plan time as a grade level where we were going to all meet and work towards the same goal. (Elementary Teacher)

There was a concerted effort by districts to link school improvement to PLC activities. One thing mentioned by several educators was that communication was better within the districts regarding the goals and plans of the district in regards to school improvement. There was a perception by the researcher that teachers were taking more ownership in the process. The urban districts would have a more difficult time doing this, just because of their size. The researcher found evidence, based on pereptions of educators in both districts, at all three levels (elementary, middle and high school) that educators were more focused on school improvement, worked more frequently on it, and were more aware of the district goals that had been set.

I think the PLCs, well to me it's a mesh of everything that we do. The PLCs lend, go exactly with what they school improvement is trying to do..I think it just kind of meshes together. (Elementary Teacher)

The task forces are very organized, and they have great leaders. And therefore, I think things get done. . . . And now that people have to go to a task force, I do think that things get done as far as school improvement. Communication I believe is much better. People are aware of the school improvement plan . . . I think it's been very positive. (High School Teacher)

Data Theme

Using data is an effective practice and, when used through collaboration, it allows us to get "beyond the numbers." Collaboration and the use of data are independent practices, but they are also interdependent practices.
                    –Laura Besser (2011, p.2)

Most, if not all educators are aware that the school improvement process involves

educators looking at data. They examine data at the beginning of a school improvement

cycle in order to help come up with their goals. They look at the data during the cycle

and at the end of the cycle to see if they are meeting those goals. School improvement

and the examination and use of data go hand in hand. The researcher noticed in the

comments by educators in regards to school improvement that educators were becoming

more comfortable with looking at data. There was an increased expectation at the district

level that they use data. Not only use it, but use the data to drive goal setting and

instructional decisions. This expectation was echoed throughout the comments made by

principals who participated in the study.

> I think that what made it in School A is we forced the hand of people using data. I think as a former teacher in the early 90's, I didn't use data to make decisions and I think this (PLCs) focuses people to do that. (Curriculum Director)

> I would say also getting better at the data that we want to review, the goal setting because goal setting has gotten a lot better. (Elementary Principal)

> I think that's the biggest accountability factor. We expect as administrators, every PLC to have a SMART goal that they are working toward with data and at the end of the year, some kind of feedback or evidence of the progress they made on that. (Middle School Principal)

> I think the biggest thing that it does for, I mean it's still really looking at, we're getting this way more and more, achievement data and ELL scores and state assessment scores are very much a part of PLC documentation. I think that is the biggest. Using the data that we have and we're far more intentional about that now than we ever used to be. (Middle School Principal)

> Our teachers in the past have never been very thorough with their data, and so now we're really kind of getting into, like professional, they're looking into best practices through data. (High School Principal)

Many of the teacher's comments in regards to data and school improvement

expressed the sentiment that the two are inseparable and as a result of PLC

implementation, they were using data more now in the school improvement process.

Teachers were becoming more specific in their goal setting. This was a result of

becoming more familiar with data.

> PLCs have changed since I've been here the four years, because data wasn't, it wasn't data driven. Well, now it's more data driven, and re-teaching, re-assessing, and that sort of thing. I think it was overwhelming at first to try to have your students meet, you know, at least, that everybody will get 75% or higher on this test and that test. So, it was a little overwhelming at first, but it's not anymore. (High School Teacher)

> Well, they (school improvement and data) kind of go hand in hand. They're connected . . . I think it just makes you more reflective. You have to be more aware of the data. I mean it's very kind of black and white. What do the numbers show?...You look at the numbers, and you make decisions based on your data. Your data kind of drives what you need to do next. (Elementary Teacher)

> Well, to keep track of data and we're expected to know at any given point what percentage of our kids have met our goal or have not. We just have high expectations in this building. I think our administrators do for us as teachers. We have high expectations for our students. We have high expectations ourselves, for each other. So, I just think the expectation is for us to know our kids and know what they need. And everybody on the team should know what those expectations are. (Elementary Teacher)

> I think it helped with our data tracking you know, because of the PLCs I think teachers are very on top of keeping track of where students are, and because we have all of that, I think it makes our school improvement team's job really easy because we just take that data, and it helps us to know as a school where we are, and where we've got to focus. I think they go hand in hand. In fact we have a committee. It's PLC and school improvement. It's one committee because they are so joined at the hip I guess . . . Looking at where we want to be as a school and what our goals are as a school, and then that trickles down into our PLCs. (High School Teacher)

The three districts involved in this study once again scheduled time for teachers to

meet and do the tedious work of looking at data and seeing where students were. They

were using the time to come up with interventions. There were specific goals set for

students and the team structure of the PLC increased the accountability for teachers.

They felt a feeling of accountability to their school, their team, and most importantly,

their students. These things came about as a result of teachers meeting and discussing

data and what it was telling them.

Changed Thought Process Theme

> *The other piece associated with that is that it changed the mind set of*
> *school improvement. And some folks were accustomed to their old way of*
> *doing it, and this was a new approach to thinking about goals and how*
> *individual teams impact that goal. The decisions that they make align to a*
> *smart goal, and then how does that align district-wide. And that forced*
> *schools to think differently.*
> *--Director of School Improvement*

The educators involved in this study were nearly unanimous in their feelings that

school improvement efforts had been improved because of the implementation of PLCs.

One of the themes that the researcher identified was that the process of school

improvement had been changed in all three districts. Educators were spending more time

on school improvement and the activities regarding school improvement were occurring

in a more frequent and ongoing basis than they had in past school improvement cycles.

As one educator stated:

> I think everybody's more aware of what it is we're trying to get done. When
> North Central would come out or whatever to evaluate the school it was like well,
> we'll kind of hide from her for 12 and a half years or six and a half years
> depending whether it's--. In that last six months before they come we'll work our
> butt off to get ready for her. And I think now with our whole faculty study groups
> it's more of a continuous process of getting--. Got to have this done, we need to
> get this done for, we can do this the second year and go on that way. I think it
> helps. (Middle School Teacher)

Teachers in the study felt that they had been given more ownership in the process.

Once again, the two urban districts did a very commendable job of setting district goals,

but allowing individual buildings, departments, and PLC teams to identify their goals and

what their students needed. The only stipulation was that the goals created had to tie or

relate to the overarching district goal. The process is working. Teachers have more

ownership and feel more connected to the process. The districts have communicated well

to the teachers and made the process much more understandable and simple. The

researcher noticed this in the interviews. Many of the teachers talked about how much

easier it was now. As a result, the implementation phase of school improvement is at a

much deeper level within the research districts. This is a comment from the former

Director of School Improvement at School B:

> I think the feedback from the external team was very positive. It was uhh, and this is my language interpreting what was back then but, umm there was significant growth in school improvement during the four years while I was there. I think that was contributed to the fact that we simplified the process. And simplified means, meant that from a district perspective we negotiated what does the school improvement goal look like and how can that be more manageable? How does that become more manageable and become more meaningful within an individual school within an individual grade-level team where department for teachers to identify what the needs of their kids are, and how do they align those needs to the entire building and to the entire district. And so, while we were clear on what those parameters were we were flexible with any individual building, how they accomplished those goals, and I think that's what you, that's what the school improvement team or the external visits said that it was, the process was more, it was simplified. Umm, it helped provide, while it helped provide direction for teachers umm, the process was clear and umm, they could see greater evidence of teacher implementation and its impact on student achievement than they had the previous ten years. (Director of School Improvement)

> I think we'll be more successful because we'll have more ownership in it. I know, you know I came in as a math teacher and our school improvement goal was math, and really I didn't know much about what I was supposed to be doing other than use the curriculum. You know, I don't know if that had been done in the past, but that, those are some of the specific goals. Use the curriculum and umm, offer, you know, facts tests and the standards. (Middle School Teacher)

One final piece that the researcher noted as present in all three districts was that

educators had established a clear link between school improvement and PLCs. This was

a change in their thinking process in regards to school improvement. PLCs and school

improvement were no longer viewed as two separate processes. They were linked. This

was an important finding for the researcher as it appears that the districts have

internalized the process.

> I think before people were—they would almost see them as two separate things.
> Here's school improvement and here's PLCs, and without a school-wide goal,
> with them realizing that their SMART goals are their PLC goals and they're also
> the school goals. It's I think helped them to see sort of the joining of school
> improvement and PLCs, that school improvement is really important and the
> process for getting those achieved is through PLCs. (High School Teacher)

PLCs as a Vehicle

The researcher selected the theme of PLCs and WFSGs being a "vehicle" for

school improvement activities because so many educators mentioned that word in their

comments regarding school improvement.

What the researcher found was that these three districts have devoted a specific

time to do school improvement activities. They are having success because they have

"meshed" the processes of PLCs and school improvement. Many of the educators talked

about past improvement cycles and how they were ineffective because time was not

given to work on school improvement. The process was similar to "one and done"

professional development activities. You set your goals and forgot about them until the

year of the external visit. Districts were not reaching the implementation phase. This has

changed in all three districts. They have found a process, a vehicle, for getting to the

implementation phase of school improvement.

> Our school improvement meshes well with our Whole-Faculty-Study-Groups . . .
> We had an external visitation, the team leader came from Washington D.C., but
> the other members of the external visitation team were from Nebraska. We
> applied for district accreditation to advanced ed., and we were approved. But our
> Whole-Faculty-Study-Groups kind of ended up being a big part of that whole
> visitation. In their report they brought it up again and again, and we brought it up
> in our information for them. The WFSGs has become the vehicle for getting our
> school improvement work completed. We found about that this year as we were
> putting together our school improvement plans for each level, elementary, middle

school, and high school. That WFSGs, the groups really had a big piece—big part of deciding what will our new goal will be. (Superintendent)

I just think it, it (PLCs) become the function that you implement either a school improvement plan, staff development effort, or you know, all of those things that will provide improvement for student achievement. It's to me—it's the tool or the vehicle to get there. (Elementary Principal)

I see the PLCs as a vehicle to school improvement. I mean, school improvement process and PLCs are meshed. We don't have two separate processes. We just have one committee. We have one way of looking at things, and I don't see those as separate entities. I see that all. PLCs is part of the school improvement process. (Middle School Principal)

With the PLCs the researcher found evidence that schools now had a vehicle to get there. Time set aside for teachers to work on school improvement is what makes the vehicle run. There was documented evidence in all three districts that they were providing that time as a result of PLC implementation. The data examination, goal setting, monitoring, etc. that are the nuts and bolts of the school improvement process are now getting done because there is a process and time to do it.

Student Achievement

Responses from Educators

> *If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional learning community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff.*
> *–Newmann and Wehlage (1995) p.37*

The researcher asked the question if educators had seen an impact on student achievement since the implementation of PLCs. There were four themes that emerged from the responses of educators. These themes identified by the researcher were assessments, data, consistency, and collaboration.

Upon examining the data in this study in regards to student achievement, the

researcher was unable to draw the conclusion that the districts involved in this study were

seeing a positive impact on student achievement. There was not enough evidence to

confirm this. There were only the perceptions of the educators involved in this study. A

review of the literature revealed that this is not uncommon. Roger Goddard, Yvonne

Goddard and Megan Taschannen-Moran (2007) indicated there is, "a paucity of research

investigating the extent to which teachers' collaborative school improvement practices

are related to student achievement" (p. 1). While they did conduct a study that indicated

a "positive relationship between teacher collaboration and differences among schools in

mathematics and reading achievement" there is still not enough evidence to support this

claim.

The reason for this is the same reason that the researcher had problems drawing a

conclusion that there was an impact on student achievement in this study. "Most existing

research is in the form of surveys and case studies, which do not provide evidence of

cause-and-effect relationships" (McClure, 2008).

The researcher had many educators in this study indicate that they had seen an

increase in student achievement as a result of PLCs being implemented. In most cases,

no direct evidence was offered other than, "ACT scores are higher" or "My kids are

doing better this year." While these perceptions may be true, the researcher was unable

to establish a link that connected PLCs to the results that were offered by educators.

PLCs may be having an effect on student achievement, but there was insufficient

evidence to draw any definitive conclusions or confirm it as a fact as a result of this

study. One comment by a district administrator summed up the findings of the

researcher:

> In schools that implemented it and implemented it well, and those that are focused on the academic needs of their children I saw significant growth. I saw it in a Title 1 middle school. I saw it in elementary buildings, and I saw it at a high school and in some cases I also saw growth in terms of adult learning that may not necessarily have equated to student achievement. And what I mean by that is adults were learning, what they were learning from each other. what they were implementing, and how they implement it. But they also learned what worked and what didn't work, and as a result of that effort umm, they refined their instruction and that ultimately had an impact on student achievement. (Director of School Improvement)

The schools that were referred to in the above quote were the ones that

participated in the study for the most part. There was once again insufficient evidence

that there had been an impact district-wide. This was especially true in the urban

districts. The administrator went on to say:

> The only drawback that I see is if teams are allowed to focus on the things that don't impact student learning. Umm, it's a waste of tax payer money, and it's a waste of teacher time. And that isn't the fault of the classroom teacher. I think that's the fault of the organization to allow those things to happen. (Director of School Improvement)

The researcher did come to the conclusion that in the schools involved in the

study of the two urban districts, there was strong leadership by the building

administration that had student achievement as the focus of their PLCs. That is probably

why they were recommended for the study.

One item noticed by the researcher was that PLCs were having an influence on

the achievement of students that might be struggling or not achieving as much as their

peers. Several educators commented on what PLCs were doing for these students:

> And I think it's that belief, and I have strong feeling about the power of positive thinking and belief with the kids and how we influence them by what we think they can do. And especially I think with our ELL kids we saw that and our

special education students. We put way too many limits on kids and I think this (PLCs) moves us beyond that because we're working for every kid to be at 100%. (Elementary Principal)

Well, we were the only middle school in School B last year to meet NYP. So, I would say we've definitely seen growth. The biggest area where I've seen growth is with the kids that struggle, because you know one of the cultural shifts besides the collaboration piece, the other cultural shift was we really look at individual kids and the data on individual kids and the interventions for struggling. And so yeah, I would say the data would show that we've had quite a bit of growth in individual kids. And what we see then is we see tremendous growth in those kids. (Middle School Principal)

I think that you're always, the biggest expectation is that you're always working in the best interest of kids. And No Child Left Behind. Not in the government sense, but in the, you know, you're doing what is best for every kid, and that you are focused on them all the time, and that everybody can learn, everybody can achieve, and what are we going to do help them do that? (Elementary Teacher)

PLCs gave teachers an opportunity to get together and talk about strategies and changes in instruction for students, "who weren't getting it." This was not happening before the implementation of PLCs and teachers were obviously not looking at data on these particular students as much. Teamwork, collaboration, and the sharing of ideas, in terms of helping all students learn came up a lot in the educator's responses to whether or not PLCs were having an effect on student achievement. They stated:

I think so, because we're collaborating more. We're working as a team. If you have the strugglers it's not just you thinking about them. I mean you're collaborating with your teammates, you're finding ways to meet their needs, maybe differently than you can do just on your own. We've also, you know, when we do get stumped or not sure what to do for a student we just don't leave it at that. You know, you continue to look for help, find help, talk to different people, bring in help so that everybody. So yeah, the scores have to go up with it. (Elementary Teacher)

I mean, it's made me a better teacher. I think it makes you a better teacher. I think it helps you improve instruction for kids. It increases achievement. Makes your group, your team, more collaborative. Helps you know, like I said, the strengths and weaknesses of the people in your building or around you. Become better problem solvers, figuring things out. I mean, I think it brings people together. It becomes our kids, not my kids, your kids. So, it brings you kind of

together as a building or as a grade level, and helping everybody. (Elementary Teacher)

Absolutely. I mean if you want a staff to truly work together to help the kids I think you need PLCs. I really honestly looking back now am not sure what we did before we had, how did it work? I just think it was more of an individual. Each teacher had a classroom, or his classroom, and it was, those were your kids and you were responsible for them. But to me that's you know, you can a have a teacher who is not there for the kids and then that class suffers, but when you've got a whole team working together you're going to make sure the kids get what they need. (Elementary Teacher)

I think, you know, it's hard to say would this, you know, would this class of kids not be where they are having not done the PLC, but I can't imagine that they--. Like, I can't imagine that this didn't affect them in a positive way. (Elementary Teacher)

I think the kids benefit from us sharing our teaching ideas. Also, we move kids, like kids who may be struggling in math and they might be in another teacher's room, and she's tried and she's re-taught and they're still not getting it. Well then, Ryan or I might work with them, and just you know, maybe explaining it a different way helps the students to, it's just something quick. It's not that our way was better. It was just another way, and it finally you know, got the idea past. So, I think that's been very powerful too. (Elementary Teacher)

Assessments Theme

They (PLCs) increase student achievement because teachers get to create common formative assessments, analyze the data, and that helps drive their instruction.
--Curriculum Director

The above quote from the Curriculum Director of School A is just one example of the many comments regarding assessments in the interviews. Many of the comments regarding assessments came from School A. This was not surprising to the researcher because the basis for DuFour's PLC model is teachers collaborating and creating common formative assessments, analyzing the data, and changing their instruction in response to the data.

At all three levels in School A (elementary, middle and high school) there were comments made by educators that the creation of formative assessments and examination of the data resulting from them was taking place and they were seeing results on student achievement. The researcher was shown examples of these assessments in the elementary school of School A. It was also interesting that the educator qualified the remark and could not directly tie the achievement to PLCs.

> The biggest measures that we've done is our district ELO's, because that is a direct measurement of our assessments, or of our curriculum. And those standards have all gone up since we've had the PLCs. ACT scores have consistently gone higher. This senior class we had this year had the highest ACT scores ever. PSAT scores have gone up as well. Umm, so, you like to say the PLCs, you know, you really can't find a direct tie, but since those things are all going up we'd say the PLCs would have a pretty, pretty good intervention. They kind of help with those things. (High School Principal)

There was one comment by a teacher in particular that stood out and gave direct evidence of teachers designing assessments and implementing strategies that increased student achievement.

> I have. This year our short term goals have been by semester, and our reading one, we noticed after we get these integrated theme tests after each theme. There are six themes. And we noticed after our first theme test early in the year that we had some more kids than we wanted to have struggling with comprehension strategies and skills, and so we decided that was going to be our focus. That's what we made our short term smart goal about, and we decided we need to do something. These kids don't know their strategies like we want them to. So, we came up with our plan. We're going to have them have a strategy notebook. We were going to every story in our anthology. We're going to develop questions that focus on the strategies that they're going to be tested on. And as a team we took turns creating those questions, sharing them, putting them into power points, or whatever to work with the kids. And it was the next theme it was like, they did fantastic. And I went wow, was it that or was it an easier test. So, we continued to do it, and it really made a difference. Our next theme their scores were great, but we noticed we had a few kids that were still struggling. So, we adjusted a little bit and came up with some other strategies. Yes, I have noticed it. And we used our PLCs to help us come up with strategies to prepare for the state reading test. With the academic language and the shared ideas, how are we going to do

this? It was, I think it was very helpful. And you know, it wasn't perfect, but our kids did really well. So, I do think it made a difference. (Elementary Teacher)

A benefit of PLCs that the researcher noticed was that teachers could now get together and not only design common formative assessments, but could also get together and discuss other assessments and come up with strategies on how they were going to teach students. Several teachers mentioned the NeSA Reading Test and how PLCs were being utilized to prepare them for it. With the addition of NeSA Math tests this year, and science next year, it would appear that all three districts have a process already in place to more effectively deal with these assessments.

Data Theme

One of the findings based on participants perceptions that the researcher discovered concerning student achievement was that the districts involved in the study were definitely looking at student achievement data more than they had prior to PLCs being implemented. As one educator stated:

> I was going to say, I think PLCs have kind of forced us as educators to take a look at data much more closely than what we used to. And I think that maybe a response to No Child Left Behind, but good or bad it is the current situation we are in and um, that's one piece that I see here at School A-2 compared to what was before compared to what we have now with PLCs is sitting down with a common assessment and talking about, well, chunking items on the assessment, did the kids meet these items and do they not meet these items and what are you doing better and how can I help my students be more proficient. That's something that's really been a positive out of the PLCs. (Middle School Teacher)

Looking at the data is important, but the PLCs also are having an impact in terms of the data making educators feel more accountable. The data examined in PLCs is taking the guesswork out of the equation as to whether or not students were mastering the material that was being presented to them. Two elementary teachers commented:

Oh yeah. I think it makes people, I think it holds you more accountable to student learning. I mean, I think a lot of times when I think of when I first got into teaching there were a lot of things that seemed very subjective like well, I think they're getting it. You know, you just didn't always have or know how to look at that data and use it effectively, and I think PLCs help do that with the different types, formative assessment, summative assessment, looking at your different assessments. Which ones drive instructions? Which ones are just for data purposes, and using that to help you to help kids. (Elementary Teacher)

Well, to keep track of our data and we're expected to know at any given point what percentage of our kids have met our goal or have not. We just have high expectations in this building. I think our administrators do for us as teachers. We have high expectations for our students. We have high expectations ourselves, for each other. So, I just think the expectation is for us to know our kids and know what they need. And everybody on the team should know what those expectations are. (Elementary Teacher)

Collaboration Theme

When teachers get together to talk in concrete, precise language about instruction and student work, their teaching dramatically improves and student achievement rises
                              --Schmoker (2006, p. 10)

The researcher found a great deal of evidence that there was collaboration in all three districts that was centered upon student achievement. Ultimately, the goal and mission of every school district should be to increase the learning and achievement of the students who attend there. Two district administrators echoed the comment made by Schmoker (2006) and talked about how collaboration in PLCs had impacted student achievement in their district.

This really forced the issue of being collaborative, planning together. I see our high schools too—really competing with each other, not only in activities and athletics, but when their academics gets reported in the paper, they're competing against each other and I see these district singleton groups that we have pulled together, like the AP teachers, AP Physics let's say, come together and be very collaborative to improve student achievement in School A. . . . I think the ultimate goal and what happens from it (PLCs) is student achievement improves and teachers become more collaborative, and the climate of your building improves. (Curriculum Director)

If they're allowed to focus on things other than what impacts directly the quality of instruction then they're not effective. Well, see if it's about collaborating on effective practices, if it's collaborating around data related to student achievement, if teachers are talking about what they've done, how that's impacted their practice, and how has that practice impacted student learning--tremendous growth. (Director of School Improvement)

The researcher found evidence amongst the educators in the study that they were collaborating effectively to improve student achievement. There were expectations and guidelines from administration as to how PLCs were to operate and what should be the topic of discussion. The comments by teachers indicated that they were collaborating and discussing their instruction and the data regarding it. In short, they were meeting the criteria provided by Schmoker (2006) that indicates they should be having an impact on student achievement. However, there was no evidence found by the researcher that they were. As one educator stated:

The focus and the collaborative effort towards student achievement, really to me, I've never seen it have that much effect until you see a good functioning PLC . . . there is an accountability to each other among the team, and an accountability for that student achievement school wide as well. (Elementary Teacher)

Consistency Theme

The theme of consistency in regards to student achievement was identified by the researcher in the comments made by educators in the two urban districts. Consistency was talked about concerning two key points. First, students would receive a consistent curriculum in the classroom. Teachers collaborating in PLCs would come up with the same course outcomes, curriculum, etc. There would be less occurrence of a teacher teaching what they wanted or what they felt a student needed to learn. The second point of consistency concerned the assessments a student would be given and the grades that the student would receive.

Both of these points go along with the student achievement theme. The urban districts have put a system in place that ensures that students are learning the same things, and that learning is measured in a consistent way. Getting teachers together to communicate about these issues has reduced redundancy in curriculum and provided more reliable data to examine and adjust instruction. This may affect student achievement in future years, but not enough time has passed and data has not been gathered to confirm this. Two educators commented on this process by saying:

> I think it's too early to tell. (sigh) You know, our umm, for instance our students have to take graduation demonstration exams umm, in math writing and reading, and those, those results have stayed pretty consistent. Umm so, can I give you, tell you that I am, our data that shows that the PLCs are having an effect on them accumulatively yet, and I also think it's too early. This in maybe only the fourth year we have been in PLCs without the (inaudible). I think what it really has helped is I think our courses are more consistent so that, again, I use American Lit. Students going into an American Lit. class, and we may have, you know, six, seven teachers of American Lit. We are being more consistent in what we are providing, the curriculum that we are providing for students, and I think that is--. I think that's important. (High School Principal)

> For me, I would say the biggest thing that I have noticed is continuity between myself and my other PLC members, at least in, with classroom grades. That's the biggest thing that I've seen that's a positive benefit. So if someone's in another teacher's American History class and then another is with me, that our grades are fairly similar. If you are earning a 3 in their class, you are probably going to be earning a 3 in my class because of that constant communication. You have the same material, it's the same tests, the same worksheets, same--. So, you are pretty much on board if you are getting an A in one you are going to get an A in the other. (Middle School Teacher)

The researcher once again found it interesting that the quote from the building principal indicated it was "too early" to tell if PLCs were having an impact on student achievement. The researcher would agree with this assessment. Many of the schools in the study spent a year or two working on curriculum and assessments. That was the focus of the PLCs at that time. Student achievement was not the primary focus. There

has not been enough time to examine any trend data from common assessments. In

regards to the effects of student achievement and the effects that PLCs have on them, the

quote below best sums up what the researcher found in the data.

> I think that one of the things that's important to remember, and Rick and Becky DuFour don't say this, PLC is a journey. It's not perfect after year one, after year two, after year three. You get better at it as you go along, but it requires the concept of capacity building and focusing in on how are we, how we, how are we developing the individual capacity of teachers, and at the same time building the collective capacity of our staff. And those things evolve over time. They don't just occur in year one. So, if someone's looking for a perfect model that you implement right away and it's magic, that's not the case, but if you're persistent, and if you're relentless in that pursuit of excellence, and you take your time to do this well you're going to see an impact on student achievement in a very short period of time. (Director of School Improvement)

It is important to remember that all of these districts have only implemented PLCs

for a relatively short period of time. The longest period of implementation has been

approximately five years. The journey is continuing for these schools.

Reasons for Effectiveness Responses

Throughout our ten-year study, whenever we found an effective school or
an effective department within a school, without exception, that school or
department has been part of a professional learning community.
–Milbrey McLaughlin (1995)

One of the final questions the researcher asked educators was what they thought

made PLCs effective. Obviously, there were numerous responses and different opinions

given as to why they were. It was interesting to note that none of the educators gave the

response that they weren't effective. They did not have a negative comment in regards to

that question.

There were three themes that emerged as the researcher examined the responses.

(a) PLCs were effective because they had changed the climate and culture of the

buildings of the districts involved in this study, (b) PLCs were effective because they had

increased collaboration amongst educators involved in this study, and (c) PLCs were

effective because they had made teachers better at using and analyzing data.

Climate and Culture Theme

> *We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning*
> *community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn*
> *many others.*
> *–Joyce and Showers (1995, p. 3)*

The researcher had a number of quotes from educators that indicated the climate

and culture of the buildings they taught in had changed. There was also a great deal of

overlap in the responses in terms of the change in culture and collaboration.

Collaboration seemed to be the reason for the change in culture. These are some

responses from educators who confirmed this idea:

> I think that my initial reaction was that it is a great idea. I think that it is a huge
> cultural shift for teachers and administrators both. And I would say with a large
> portion of teachers we've made that cultural shift to collaboration. We may not
> have the exact PLC perfect process down, but we're collaborating, which is a
> huge step. (Middle School Principal)

> You don't walk through the building and everybody's doors shut, and nobody's
> talking to each other. You know, that's gone. The culture is that we collaborate.
> We work together. We plan together, and even if we're not meeting in PLCs we
> have several groups throughout the building that meet. We have seven PLC
> groups that plan almost daily together. So, we've seen a huge growth in that.
> (Middle School Principal)

The researcher found that educators felt more of a sense of community in their

schools as a result of PLCs which would be a change in culture. There were words like

"collective" and "community of learners" which indicated a shift in the culture of the

school. Many of the responses compared what was going on now, to what they had

experienced before and there was clear evidence that these schools had been changed

because of the PLC process.

I think that not only to the students grow, but the teachers grow professionally. And that trust, the collective efficacy. I value you. You value me, and we're in this together and dealing with mistakes along the way. (Elementary Principal)

I think it's how you get things done. And how you make learning happen for kids, and how you grow as a community within your school as instructors or students. And what we have been able to do under the name PLC is carve out time to make those things happen, and when you have a formal structure for something it's not just happening on why it's a part of the everyday thinking and how you function . . . I think I'm better at what I do because of it. Because I've had those opportunities to collaborate and think in terms of these aren't just my kids, but they're our kids, and what can we do. Remember to keep focused on who's succeeding, who's not succeeding, what can we do to make it happen? So I know I'm definitely better at what I do because of PLCs. . . . Nobody's alone in this either because we're in it together. . . . The kids learn. The kids accept. That's what we're here for is to provide everyone with the very best education possible. And they get it. And they learn. They do better, and I do better, and everybody does better. It creates a culture of community within a school. (Elementary Teacher)

I mean if you want a staff to truly work together to help the kids I think you need PLCs. I really honestly looking back now am not sure what we did before we had, how did it work? I just think it was more of an individual. Each teacher had a classroom, or his classroom, and it was, those were your kids and you were responsible for them. But to me that's you know, you can a have a teacher who is not there for the kids and then that class suffers, but when you've got a whole team working together you're going to make sure the kids get what they need. (Elementary Teacher)

I just think that opportunity for those deep discussions about kids, because we don't have the time we need to do that. Like I said, I truly value that time. It's sacred. And I know that that's what we're going to focus on. We are not talking about who's going to recess when or who has duties. You know its kids. (Elementary Teacher)

I think I'm a strong supporter of PLCs, which has changed. I wasn't at first, but I didn't understand the power of them until I was in a building that everyone bought into it. (Elementary Teacher)

It was also noted by the researcher in the responses based on the perceptions of the educators in the study, the culture had shifted in these schools because teachers were meeting together outside of the time frames scheduled for PLCs by the districts. Principals were using staff meeting times for PLCs, teachers were getting together in

their PLC groups before and after school. Much of this was in response to the fact that districts were providing time for PLCs to meet, but it wasn't enough. The elementary and middle schools at the urban districts indicated they would like more time set aside for their groups to meet. The age of their students makes it difficult for early outs and late starts to be scheduled frequently. The PLC time is so valuable to them that their culture changed and they look for every opportunity possible to get together and collaborate. Two study participants stated:

> So, we use staff meeting time for PLCs. Again, I mean I just think we're a community of learners. So, we use staff meeting time for PLCs. Again, I mean I just think we're a community of learners. (Elementary Principal)

> Well, interesting that you asked me that. Now, if you would have asked me this five years ago when we first started it I would have had a completely different answer. But now my perception of them is that it's a very sacred time that we're given. The elementary schools monthly, we have our professional learning community time, but that's actually kind of transpired into an ongoing, I mean I see my team as a professional learning community all the time. And the times that are set aside once a month are just that's we know that we have that time. The other times that we need to talk about kids it's just, it's daily, but that planned time is very intense and very specific. And so, it's pretty important at this point. Five years ago it was, I kind of saw it as another meeting to go to, but it's much bigger than that now. (Elementary Teacher)

Collaboration Theme

There were 30 comments made by educators indicating collaboration as the reason for the effectiveness of PLCs. That was the largest number of comments amongst the three themes and the researcher came to the conclusion that the collaboration teachers experienced was the main reason that PLCs were effective. Teachers were experiencing something different. They no longer felt isolated. They had others they could talk to about a problem they were trying to solve.

> I think there was quite a bit of collaborative culture in our elementaries. At the high school it was in your own classroom, you do your own thing, and you don't

discuss too much with other people. And this (PLCs) really forced the issue of being collaborative, planning together. (Curriculum Director)

Teachers tend to teach in isolation, and this just provides that collaboration opportunity. (Superintendent)

I mean, it's made me a better teacher. I think it makes you a better teacher. I think it helps you improve instruction for kids. It increases achievement. Makes your group, your team more collaborative. Helps you know, like I said, the strengths and weaknesses of the people in your building or around you. Become better problem solvers, figuring things out. I mean, I think it brings people together. It becomes our kids, not my kids, your kids. So, it brings you kind of together as a building or as a grade level, and helping everybody . . . That piece. The collaborative piece. You don't feel isolated. I mean, you have lots of people to brainstorm with, to work with, to problem solve with, bounce ideas off with. So, I like that . . . I do think it's an excellent process. I think it, like I said, makes you more reflective. It makes you a better teacher. It makes you really take a look at, you know when you look at the data and if my kids aren't performing as well as my teammates then it's, I mean, you've got to figure out what to do you know, and to look at it as a growth or a learning experience. Not that I'm a bad teacher, but what can I do to make things better. So, I think it really helps you be more reflective and improve instructions for kids. (Elementary Teacher)

Collaborating by itself is not the sole reason that makes PLCs effective. There are other factors that go into it. Educators mentioned this in their responses. There has to be data examination, goal setting, and discussion about students. As two building principals stated:

It's, and it's not just collaborating for the sake of collaborating. It's a focused collaboration. So, you're centered around a goal. You're centered around student saving. You're centered around strategies to improve student achievement. No, I--. There's a lot of keen collaboration that can take place in the schools, but it might be talking about the next field trip or how we're going to handle lunch tomorrow. Those aren't the same sorts of collaboration as you find in a PLC. It is focused on student achievement. (Elementary Principal)

But coming here, like I said having the opportunity to hire staff, I wrote down my expectations and gave a hard copy to candidates before we even interviewed. And teaming was one of them, that we will collaborate, and we will make time for it, and if that's not something you're willing to do then that's ok, but this probably isn't the place for you because that's the kind of commitment we need. (Elementary Principal)

Schools in the study were collaborating in the right ways. They were being effective in their PLCs. Many veteran teachers commented they wished they would have had the opportunity to collaborate earlier in their careers. This is another indication that the collaboration piece of PLCs is one of the reasons for their effectiveness. One educator commented on his earlier years;

> I, you know, I don't know what the, our teachers will tell you, but I like them. . . . And when I go back to being a brand new teacher in this building, and even being a veteran, you know, there were teachers in my department that I looked up to, that I, you know, we'd spend time here until 5:00 and 5:30 at night discussing teaching. And it would have been nice to have that time during the day to sit in with a group of them. So, I just think they're powerful. (High School Principal)

Collaboration in PLCs gave educators a "team mentality." They worked together more to accomplish tasks. Working together they felt they were achieving more than they had in the past. Their students were achieving more as a result of their efforts. This was found among all three districts and all grade levels.

> You have to have people that are willing to work with the team. Can't have you know, a Michael Jordan if you don't have the team members that are going to support him. You know, Michael Jordan is nothing by himself. (Elementary Teacher)

> Because I've had those opportunities to collaborate and think in terms of these aren't just my kids, but they're our kids, and what can we do. Remember to keep focused on who's succeeding, who's not succeeding, what can we do to make it happen? So I know I'm definitely better at what I do because of PLCs. (Elementary Teacher)

> They're better because we're sharing and we're talking and brainstorming. And everybody brings their ideas. We're just better at what we do because of it. (Elementary Teacher)

> I think so, because we're collaborating more. We're working as a team. If you have the strugglers it's not just you thinking about them. I mean you're collaborating with your teammates, you're finding ways to meet their needs, maybe differently than you can do just on your own. We've also, you know, when we do get stumped or not sure what to do for a student we just don't leave it

at that. You know, you continue to look for help, find help, talk to different people, bring in help so that everybody. (Elementary Teacher)

 My feelings have been very positive. Umm, we can get a lot done as we work together. Having taught at one point in a school where I was the math department I find it so much more helpful to have someone else to share the load, both in deciding what we're going to do to bounce ideas off of each other and then, just the actual work load aspects of it can be divided it up to some extent. So, yeah, I think they're great. (High School Teacher)

Data Theme

The researcher attended a Data Teams Summit in June of 2010 and Douglas Reeves and others suggested that in order to be successful and proficient with using data, teams of teachers should examine data on a quarterly basis at the bare minimum. Weekly meetings involving the examination of student data was considered exemplary. The comments made by educators in this study led the researcher to come to the conclusion that all of the schools involved in this study were proficient in their use of data. Most if not all of them, were examining data on a monthly basis.

Many of the educators talked about not being exposed to data and how to analyze it to improve instruction and student achievement prior to the implementation of PLCs. That is probably the reason they mentioned data and its usefulness as a reason for PLC effectiveness. As one district administrator stated:

> I think that what made it in School A is we forced the hand of people using data. I think as a former teacher in the early 90's I didn't use data to make decisions and I think this focuses people to do that. (Curriculum Director)

It was also mentioned by educators that the data examination in PLCs was causing teachers to focus more on what they needed to improve and that was the reason for their effectiveness. As one principal stated:

> You know, looking at data, and looking at places they think that they can improve upon, and then focusing on what they need to do with their own teaching in order

to umm, improve that data. And that's pretty--. I look at--. I mean, when you again, we're honing. We're getting better at honing in on what it is we need to do. Umm, I just think we're much more focused than we used to be.

Diligence and more reflection on their teaching were also mentioned by teachers

as traits they had developed as a result of their work with data in PLCs.

I think you're more diligent about it. You're more aware and conscious of the data that you are collecting, and I think collecting what's going to be important, what's going to guide instruction. You kind of have to go through and figure out what is really important, what's going to help me, what am I just going to do, you know. So, I do think it helps you just be more aware of what information you need or which information's going to actually help you help kids. (Elementary Teacher)

I do think it's an excellent process. I think it, like I said, makes you more reflective. It makes you a better teacher. It makes you really take a look at, you know when you look at the data and if my kids aren't performing as well as my teammates then it's, I mean, you've got to figure out what to do you know, and to look at it as a growth or a learning experience. Not that I'm a bad teacher, but what can I do to make things better. So, I think it really helps you be more reflective and improve instructions for kids. (Elementary Teacher)

School District A Survey Findings

During the first two years of implementation of PLCs, School A in this study

conducted surveys of the administrators and teachers employed by the district. The

surveys were conducted in May of 2006 and 2007. The results of the survey were given

to the researcher by the Office of Staff Development of the district and provided the

researcher with additional data that was significant to the study.

The summary of the second survey stated:

The results of the survey indicates that PLC teams are operational in all schools in the district and that although there is a variety of team structures across the district and between grade levels, most if not all teams have established operational procedures and a better understanding of the process. When asked, both teachers and administrators indicated that continued training in the Rick DuFour model of PLCs will further enhance the program.

One of the more important findings of the study that the researcher noted was the percentage of positive responses from teachers and administrators to whether or not PLC teams were responding to the four essential questions of PLCs in DuFour's (2004) model. The four essential questions are: (a) What will students know and be able to do? (b) How will students learn it? (c) How do you know when students learn it? (d) What happens if students do not learn or understand? (p. 21)

All three levels (elementary, middle, and high school) of teachers and administrators responded that PLCs were responding to all four questions. All of the positive responses exceeded 95% in all levels. The only two exceptions to this were middle level and high school teachers were lower (88%) in their positive responses to question four, "What happens if students do not learn or understand?"

When respondents to the survey were asked if instruction had changed as the result of PLCs and the work done in them, 88% of administrators responded yes to that question. Seventy eight percent of elementary teachers responded yes to the question. The lowest percentage was from middle school teachers where 56% said yes.

Some of the more interesting findings that relate to the researcher's questions in this study included the answers to the following questions. The tables contain the level of teachers and the percentage of responses to the question.

It was obvious that the majority of teachers in School A are analyzing student data at least once per quarter.

Table 5

Level of Teachers and Percentage of Responses to the question: How Often Did Your

PLC Meetings Include Analysis of Student Data?

	Frequency of Data Analysis		
Teacher Level	Quarterly	Monthly	2 to 3 Times a Month
Elementary	34%	33%	23%
Middle School	54%	27%	10%
High School	50%	26%	8%

Table 6

Level of Teachers and Percentage of Responses to the Question: Did Your PLC Team

Change Instruction as a Result of Discussions on Student Data?

Teacher Level	Yes	No
Elementary	78%	22%
Middle School	56%	44%
High School	52%	48%

Once again, the majority of teachers in all three levels indicated "yes." They were

examining student data and changing instruction. The researcher noted that the

elementary teachers had a higher percentage of respondents saying "yes." This was not a

total surprise however based upon comments of the district Curriculum Director. Her

perception was that the elementary schools had been collaborating at a higher level and

were ahead of their middle and high school colleagues.

Table 7

Level of Teachers and Percentage of Responses to the Question: Did Your PLC Team Implement New Strategies to Improve Instruction?

Teacher Level	Yes	Sometimes	No
Elementary	46%	49%	5%
Middle School	38%	44%	18%
High School	40%	40%	20%

The previous tables and data indicate that not only are teachers in School A looking at data, they are making adjustments to their instruction based upon examining the data.

The researcher thought this question and results were significant because they refer to the consistency theme in the area of student achievement. One of the goals for School District A in regards to their PLC, and for School B as well, was to try and develop more consistency in instruction and assessment so that students would have the same experience in a course, regardless of the teacher. They would have the same curriculum, assessments, grading scale, etc., in order to reach that goal. That is happening in School District A. The conversations are taking place to help accomplish that goal and based on the conversations with educators, they have made tremendous progress in reaching that goal.

Table 8

Level of Teachers and Percentage of Responses to the Question: Did Your PLC Team Analyze Group, Individual and Subgroup Assessment Data?

Teacher Level	Yes	No
Elementary	80%	20%
Middle School	64%	36%
High School	60%	40%

Table 9

Level of Teachers and Percentage of Responses to the Question: Did You Select Essential Common Outcomes for Course Content by PLC Discussion?

Teacher Level	Yes	No
Elementary	91%	9%
Middle School	93%	7%
High School	84%	16%

The researcher found it significant that School District A utilized a survey and compiled data to try and determine if PLCs were having their desired effects. They were the only district in the study to do this. It's notable in the researcher's opinion because the district is modeling the same actions that it expects of it's PLC teams.

Initial Board Support

School A began the PLC process during the 2004-2005 school year with professional development activities with administrators in the district. In the spring of 2005, the school board committed to the process by approving late starts for the high schools in the district. They also committed $30,000 that year for two conferences

conducted by the DuFour's. Another $40,000 was committed in the summer and fall of 2006 for two conferences. Starting with the 2006-2007 school year, District Staff Development days are utilized for PLC teams to meet.

The Curriculum Director for School A stated that the district had now, "internalized the PLC process." The researcher agrees with this statement. Of the three districts participating in this study, School A was clearly the furthest along in the process and had done the most training and professional development with the process. The school board of the district had given the most financial support for the process and the accountability and follow up procedures used by the district office were the most effective and extensive of the three districts.

School B received board approval for PLCs in the spring of 2007 and PLCs started meeting in the fall of 2007.

School C received board approval to begin PLCs in their school in March of 2007. According to the Superintendent of School C, the board gave approval when it approved the school calendar for the following school year. The calendar contained early dismissals to create time for PLCs to meet.

All of the educators in this study indicated they had tremendous support from their boards of education in regards to implementing PLCs in their districts. There were no negative comments when respondents were asked if they had experienced any resistance from the board of education. The central administration at all three districts did a good job of educating their boards on the benefits of PLCs. There can be a public perception that it's "coffee and donut time" as one district administrator put it. The researcher felt that all three districts did an adequate job of not only educating their

boards, but also educating their patrons about the important work they were doing during PLC time and how it was helping students. The researcher came to this conclusion because when asked if they had encountered any resistance from board members or patrons regarding the implementation of PLCs, almost all of the educators involved indicated they had not, or the resistance was minimal. They also gave examples of how they educated their board and patrons prior to implementation of PLCs (board proposals, newsletters, and articles on the districts website).

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

PLCs have impacted the buildings of the three school districts involved in this study in the areas of professional development and school improvement based upon the perceptions of the educators in this study. While the researcher was unable to conclude that student achievement was impacted in this study, this was perhaps due more to the study design and being unable to directly link a cause-and-effect relationship to PLCs and student achievement. The perception of many of the educators in the study was that PLCs had impacted student achievement, or would in the future.

Findings on Professional Development Impact

The perceptions of the 30 educators interviewed for this study indicated that PLCs impacted professional development. The collaboration of teachers has a very powerful effect on a school. When teachers were allotted time to work together to make lesson plans, design assessments, review student's work, etc. it benefited both students and teachers. The researcher found documented evidence in all three school districts that teachers were being allotted extra time to work together and conduct professional development activities.

There was very strong collaboration amongst teachers in all of the schools involved in this study. Collaboration had become internalized and had changed the culture of all of the schools based on the perceptions of the educators. Teachers were learning from each other. They were sharing instructional strategies. They were reviewing curriculum together and designing assessments. They were comparing student data and discussing ways to help students who were struggling.

The researcher noted that novice teachers often benefitted the most from PLCs. Teachers tend to work in isolation a great deal of the time and PLCs gave novice teachers the opportunity to ask questions and learn from their more experienced colleagues. A new attorney or doctor obviously benefits from the advice and knowledge of their older and more experienced coworkers. It works the same way amongst professionals in school systems.

It should be noted that novice teachers obviously have skills and knowledge that experienced teachers can benefit from. Many of the teachers interviewed in this study talked about the updated methods and technology skills of more recent graduates and how the teaching veterans benefitted from their advice and conversation.

Based upon the perceptions of educators in this study, the researcher found that the professional development programs in all three districts were more effective after the implementation of PLCs. Professional development activities were more organized and focused because of PLCs. All three schools were closer to, or had reached the implementation phase of professional development as a result of the work in PLCs.

A great deal of credit for the improvement of focus and organization in professional development in all three districts should be directed at the district administration of the districts that participated in this study. There was clear evidence based upon the perceptions of participants that district administrators had given teachers a voice in what their professional development needs were. These needs were gathered from the PLCs. There was also evidence from perceptions that the districts were more focused with their resources and directing them towards professional development that aligned with district goals.

Findings on School Improvement Impact

The researcher came to the conclusion based upon the perceptions of educators in this study that school improvement has been impacted in all three schools involved in the study.

One of the biggest things the researcher noted in this study is that teachers have been given time to do the necessary things involved in the school improvement process. There was evidence offered in all three districts involved in the study that teachers were being allotted extra time to conduct school improvement activities. They appreciated this time a great deal. There were comments regarding school improvement activities before the implementation of PLCs that led the researcher to believe that there was insufficient "buy in" by the faculty to the process. There was a disconnect between teachers and the process. One of the reasons for this disconnect was the lack of time given by districts for teachers to effectively work on school improvement activities. It was one more thing that added to their already heavy workload. By giving teachers time, the schools involved in the study made school improvement more manageable. As one teacher noted, "Anytime you focus on something, it gets better." By focusing on school improvement more and devoting the valuable resource of time to teachers, the districts have seen an impact on school improvement.

Another reason for the disconnect in the researcher's opinion is that teachers before the implementation of PLCs were not given a voice in the goal selection of the district. The two urban districts in the study have done an outstanding job of giving teachers a voice in the process through their PLC groups. It makes the process more meaningful and personal for the teachers, and thus, more effective.

The districts involved in this study all did a thorough job of connecting the PLC process to the school improvement process. Each district was successful in matching their PLC group goals to the overarching district school improvement goals. A connection has been made between what the teacher is doing in the classroom and what the district goal is. Many of the respondents in the study referred to the term accountability in their interviews. It has increased in all three districts. The PLC process has helped schools increase the accountability of their teachers to the school improvement process.

Findings on Student Achievement Impact

The researcher had difficulty coming to a conclusion about the impact of PLCs on student achievement. The perception of the majority of educators involved in this study was that they were indeed having an impact. There was insufficient evidence offered by the educators to prove this was the case. Additionally, the researcher observed that student achievement was defined differently by different people with each district. Student achievement may not have been clearly defined enough in the interview questions asked of the respondents. Student achievement could encompass everything from classroom formative assessments to norm-referenced assessments such as the ACT.

The educators involved in the study had mixed responses to the question of whether or not PLCs were having an impact on student achievement as well. There were even mixed responses amongst educators in the same district. There were several reasons the researcher believed were responsible for this.

One reason is that the three school districts involved have not had a consistent measure to look at any student achievement data. The State of Nebraska has been changing standards and assessments the last three years that all three districts have been

operating PLCs. The state has gone to a single, high-stakes test in writing, reading, and math and will pilot a science test this year. Many of the teachers involved in the study mentioned that PLCs are now addressing those tests and preparing students for them, but the teachers had no way of knowing during this study if they were having any effect.

Another reason the researcher was unable to come to the conclusion that PLCs were having an impact on student achievement is that there are so many factors that can impact student achievement. If there were increases in let's say norm-referenced math test scores, it would be difficult to solely attribute those increases to establishment of PLCs. Perhaps there were changes in staff, textbooks, curriculum, etc. during that time. Once again, the evidence was just not clear enough for the researcher to make a definite conclusion.

One of the main reasons for the researcher coming to the conclusion that the PLCs may not have had an impact on student achievement is that the goals and focus of the PLCs have not yet been specifically on student achievement. For example, School C spent an entire year aligning its curriculum and a large portion of another realigning it to new state standards. Most of the educators in School District C were glad to have the time to do this and agreed it needed to be done. It has eliminated a lot of redundancy in the curriculum—kids aren't being taught about dinosaurs five or six times. Teachers now know what is covered and what students should know before they get to them. One could argue that student achievement might be increased because new material is being learned and time is not being wasted on covering already mastered outcomes as a result of the curriculum realignment. The problem is there is no evidence of that found in this study. It is too early to tell.

Both high school teachers in School District C talked about the ACT scores of their seniors being high for the 2009-2010 school year, but both commented it was, "an awesome class," and scores might drop the following year.

The two urban districts in this study were both working on items in their PLC process that were related to student achievement, but once again it was not directly related to increasing student achievement. There was an exception to this. At the elementary level in both districts, the researcher found evidence of teachers talking about student achievement, primarily in the area of reading, and developing strategies and interventions to help increase student achievement and implementing them.

School District A has spent a great deal of time trying to get teams of teachers at the same grade level or subject area to develop common formative assessments in their PLC groups. They would then have the student achievement data they wanted to examine. There was evidence that the formative assessments had been developed, but there has not been enough time that has elapsed to examine any trend data from those assessments. Some have only been in place for a year or two, thus making it difficult to draw any conclusions on student achievement in regards to those assessments.

School District A was the first school in the study to implement PLCs. One would expect that they would be farther along in the process than School District B and the researcher found this to be true, based upon the perceptions of educators in both districts.

The high school's PLC focus at School District B appeared to be centered on creating common curriculum, assessments, and grading scales. Students would have the same experiences in a course, regardless of the teacher. This appeared to be a logical and

necessary step the researcher believed after interviewing the educators in that building.

The school was moving closer to having a common set of data they could examine in

order to make instructional decisions. It would be difficult to analyze data from

classrooms with different curriculum, assessments, and grading scales and try and use it

to make informed instructional decisions to help improve student achievement.

The middle school educators interviewed at School District B did not offer a lot of

evidence as to whether or not student achievement had been impacted in their opinion.

They were however, the only middle school in the district to meet AYP in the 2008-2009

school year. Once again, the researcher could not attribute that result to PLCs.

The elementary educators at School District B did make a lot of comments about

student achievement in their interviews and the researcher noticed that they were often

talking about student achievement in reading. Student reading levels were the focus of

many PLC conversations and interventions were being created for students who were not

achieving the classroom goals that had been set. Based upon the perceptions of educators

in this building, the researcher thought that PLCs may be having an impact on improving

student achievement in reading at the elementary level School B. However, the

researcher was unable to confirm this as a fact or directly relate the student achievement

in reading to the establishment of PLCs.

Whether or not student achievement at School Districts A and B had been

impacted was determined by the researcher to an extent by what the purpose and focus of

the PLC teams were. The high school and middle school of both districts were focusing

on things that were indirectly involved with student achievement. They were creating

common formative assessments and adjusting instruction based on the results. There was

evidence that curriculum was being aligned and grading scales were being standardized.

These were necessary steps that needed to be taken before student achievement could be

addressed and analyzed. The former Director of School Improvement at School District

B perhaps summed up the researcher's sentiments regarding the impact of PLCs on

student achievement the best when he said,

> PLC is a journey. It's not perfect after year one, after year two, after year three. You get better at it as you go along, but it requires the concept of capacity building and focusing in on how are we, how we, how are we developing the individual capacity of teachers, and at the same time building the collective capacity of our staff. And those things evolve over time. They don't just occur in year one. So, if someone's looking for a perfect model that you implement right away and it's magic, that's not the case, but if you're persistent, and if you're relentless in that pursuit of excellence, and you take your time to do this well you're going to see an impact on student achievement in a very short period of time.

Findings on What Makes PLCs Effective

Based upon the perceptions of educators involved in the study, the researcher

found that the three things educators mentioned the most as to what makes PLCs

effective were collaboration, changing the culture of a school, and facilitating the

examination and use of data.

Fullan (2001) stated that giving teachers time to collaborate left them "thirsting

for more." The researcher heard in comments from educators that this was true. Many of

the educators talked about meeting outside of PLC time (before school, after school,

during planning time, etc.) to discuss PLC items. They were finding other times to

collaborate.

The collaboration and culture change were mentioned together by two elementary

teachers who stated:

Well, interesting that you asked me that. Now, if you would have asked me this five years ago when we first started it I would have had a completely different answer. But now my perception of them is that it's a very sacred time that we're given. The elementary schools monthly, we have our professional learning community time, but that's actually kind of transpired into an ongoing, I mean I see my team as a professional learning community all the time. And the times that are set aside once a month are just that's we know that we have that time. The other times that we need to talk about kids it's just, it's daily, but that planned time is very intense and very specific. And so, it's pretty important at this point. Five years ago it was, I kind of saw it as another meeting to go to, but it's much bigger than that now. (Elementary Teacher)

The kids learn. The kids accept. That's what we're here for is to provide everyone with the very best education possible. And they get it. And they learn. They do better, and I do better, and everybody does better. It creates a culture of community within a school. (Elementary Teacher)

In looking at the perceptions of educators, the researcher observed that collaboration was the reason for the culture change in the school. Before PLCs, teachers were teaching in isolation. There has to be some impact, large or small, on the culture of a school building when districts set aside specific time for teachers to get together and collaborate. As one teacher said about PLCs,

I think it's how you get things done. And how you make learning happen for kids, and how you grow as a community within your school as instructors or students. And what we have been able to do under the name PLC is carve out time to make those things happen, and when you have a formal structure for something it's not just happening on why it's a part of the everyday thinking and how you function.

Based on the perceptions of educators in this study, PLCs appeared to be effective in increasing the skill level of teachers in the collection, examination, and analysis of data. The researcher heard comments from educators in all three districts and among all three levels (elementary, middle, and high school) about how much data is a part of PLC meetings. Some of the comments from educators indicated that they had received little training on how to examine and analyze data before the creation of PLCs in their

buildings. It was evident to the researcher from the educator's perceptions that data use

and analyzing it were a large part of PLC meetings in each district and building in this

study. As one teacher stated,

> Yeah, I think. I mean in a way because I think you're more diligent about it.
> You're more aware and conscious of the data that you are collecting, and I think
> collecting what's going to be important, what's going to guide instruction. You
> kind of have to go through and figure out what is really important, what's going to
> help me, what am I just going to do, you know. So, I do think it helps you just be
> more aware of what information you need or which information's going to
> actually help you help kids.

Teachers talked about using data to help guide their instruction. This was a

definite change in culture from what occurred prior to PLC's. Educators discussed how

they examined standards data together and how they worked together to get students

ready for the NeSA Reading Test. These things would not have happened without giving

teachers a structured time to get together and collaborate.

PLCs or WFSGs

It has been noted that the two urban districts involved in this study used the PLCs

model advocated by Rick DuFour. The rural school in this study used the WFSG model

advocated by Carlene Murphy and Dale Lick. Based on educator perceptions, all three

districts impacted professional development and school improvement when implementing

PLCs in their schools. They all have educators that believe PLCs are effective. The three

districts involved picked models that fit their needs and make them effective.

It is not surprising that the two urban districts found success with DuFour's

model. This model is based upon teachers of the same subject area or grade level

collaborating together and creating common formative assessments. The urban districts

involved in this study were able to have teams of teachers of the same grade level and subject area meet on a regular basis.

The rural district was at a disadvantage when it initially tried the DuFour model, as it did not have teams of teachers teaching the same subject area or grade level, or if they did, they were at different sites that made creating times to meet difficult. The WFSG model and its different approach and guidelines worked better for them. Different models work for different districts and the three districts in this study did an admirable job of researching and ultimately picking a model that fit and worked for their district.

One finding of the researcher was that schools that appeared to have internalized the PLC process the most, tended to be the schools that had been operating PLCs for the longest time and the teachers at those schools gave the most in depth answers to the interview questions.   Of the three school districts in the study, School District A probably had internalized the process the most. There also was extensive work done by the district administration of School A to monitor the process and see if it was having the desired effects.   There was evidence that School District B contacted School Distirct A about their experiences with PLCs, it would seem obvious that School District A would be farther along in terms of internalization.

The schools that had internalized the process the most also had strong leadership from the building principal. This was especially true at the elementary buildings of School Districts A and B. Both principals of these districts set high expectations for their PLC groups based upon the perceptions of teachers in their buildings. Both of them carefully monitored the activities of their PLCs and made sure they were reaching their

goals. They created and nurtured a culture of collaboration that extended beyond the scheduled PLC time—planning time, before and after school, etc.

Recommendations

Clearly there are many benefits to schools that implement PLCs in their buildings. The collaboration of professionals yielded many positive benefits based on the perceptions of the educators involved in this study.

While the researcher found little evidence of an impact on student achievement with PLCs, The interviews with educators at these three districts indicated that their students in their classrooms were benefitting from the professional conversations that they were having Murphy and Lick (2005) stated that there is, "no simple yes answer" as to whether or not PLCs will increase student achievement (p. 209). The response they give to that question is, "it depends on."

Five teachers discussed preparing students for the upcoming district assessment and a veteran teacher shared his strategies for teaching students about a book all students were reading. Two younger teachers were having trouble getting students to make connections in the book and the veteran teacher explained to them he had the same difficulty when he first started and this is what he did to correct it. It was a powerful display that impacted the researcher and I knew that PLCs were going to have a lot of positive effects in a variety of areas of teaching.

When compared to the alternative of doing nothing, or conducting business as usual, there is little doubt that PLCs can have a positive impact. Allowing teachers to collaborate and giving them time to do so, will yield many positive impacts on schools and students if implemented properly. Those impacts are dependent upon the school

district leadership and the goals they set for the district and their PLC teams. The old adage of, "two heads are better than one" comes to mind here. Three, four, or five heads add even more to the benefits. I experienced the isolation in the classroom and not knowing who to ask when I had a question about curriculum or a teaching strategy. I was the department head and only science teacher in the building when I started teaching. I wish I would have had a PLC, or at least another science teacher, to meet with. I know I would have grown professionally from having conversations with others.

Following some observations in this study, and based on the researcher's experience, it may be more difficult for smaller schools in Nebraska to implement PLCs. Many schools have only one or two teachers at a grade level or in a subject area. One recommendation would be for smaller schools to collaborate together in order for teachers to get together and collaborate. This effort could be undertaken around Educational Service Units or neighboring districts in Nebraska. Some ways to accommodate this collaboration would be for interested schools to utilize; 1) Distance learning technology; 2) Skype, or 3) Social networking sites.

The selection of the appropriate PLC model to follow should also be a priority for schools. The DuFour model used by the urban districts in this study fit their needs and what they were trying to accomplish. The WFSG model that the rural district in the study implemented fit their school better. Careful research, planning and implementation is recommended to schools if they are going to implement this process successfully.

One negative theme that came up regarding PLCs was the lack of time to meet. The high schools in the study had an advantage in creating time for teachers to meet. Their students are old enough to drive and can also stay home by themselves if school is

dismissed early or started late to create PLC time for teachers. The elementary and middle school teachers in the study were very vocal about the need for more time, but it is easy to see the difficulties caused to parents of students at these grade levels in regards to what arrangements would need to be made in terms of supervision and care of their children during late starts and early outs. One can also see why districts wanted to avoid this controversy with parents.

Districts should look for solutions to this problem. Perhaps teams of subs can be hired for the day so teams of teachers can meet at different times throughout the day. Activities might be created for large groups of students to participate in together so supervision could be done by a few teachers or paraprofessionals, while teachers meet.

Future Study

A recommendation for a future study would be to examine the perceptions of teachers who have been part of a PLC for five years. Their perceptions could be examined in regards to whether or not they felt they had improved as a teacher and in what ways had they improved?

Another topic for future study should be whether or not districts and schools that had started operating PLCs were still involved in the process. The study would examine whether or not the PLC process had become imbedded at the district level and implementation was fully achieved, or the district had moved on to another initiative. Additionally, new initiatives are often started and others ended during changes in leadership. It would be an interesting study to see the impact of new leadership on the PLC process.

Teachers getting together for focused collaboration centered upon student achievement can have a tremendous impact upon a school in a variety of areas. The benefits and growth that the schools in this study experienced are awaiting those schools who are willing to embrace change and implement PLCs.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Research Questions

Where did you first hear about Professional Learning Communities?

When did you get School Board approval for PLCs?

How do you feel about Professional Learning Communities? Have they changed you or your school in the past three years? How?

Did you encounter any resistance/obstacles when trying to establish a PLC at your school? District Office? School Board? Patrons?

Which model or author was most influential to your school when implementing a Professional Learning Community?
 (Whole Faculty Study Groups, DuFour and Eaker, Hord and Sommers, other)

Why did you go with that model and not others?

Describe the make-up of your PLC groups. How were they initially organized and why did you do it that way? Subject matter? Grade Level?

How often and when do your Professional Learning Communities meet? Is it enough time?

Do you keep a record of meeting minutes?

Do staff members come up with their own agendas, or is it district driven?

What are the expectations, if any, placed upon the PLCs?

Have you noticed any effect on student achievement since your implementation of PLCs? ACT Tests? STARS? State Assessments? Grades?

What effect has a PLC had on school improvement efforts in your school?

 Have you incorporated school improvement activities within your PLC? If yes, how?

What effects have PLCs had on instruction?

What effects have PLCs had on professional development?

What limitations/drawbacks have you associated with PLCs?

Would you recommend establishing a PLC to other schools? If so, why?

Appendix B

UNL IRB Informed Consent Form

Nebraska
Lincoln

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Department of Educational Administration

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

IRB#

Identification of Project:

Educators Perceptions of Successful Professional Learning Communities in Nebraska

Purpose of the Research:

This research project will examine the perceptions of educators in the state of Nebraska who have been members of a Professional Learning Community at their school. The purpose of the research is to examine the effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community in Nebraska schools and to gain insight as to what makes them effective. Research subjects must be a certified teacher or administrator in a school district in Nebraska and their school must have implemented Professional Learning Communities in their district for a minimum of three years. Research will be conducted in the spring of 2010.

Procedures:

Participation in this study will require approximately 60- 90 minutes of your time. The researcher will come to your school and will conduct an interview with you and other members of your school's Professional Learning Community. You will be asked a series of questions regarding the operation of your Professional Learning Community. The interviews will be audiotaped.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.
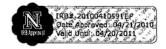
Benefits:

There is not a lot of research that has been done on the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities. You may find the information that comes out of the research to be very helpful and contribute to enhancing your experience in a Professional Learning Community even further. The information gained from this study may help us better understand the important role that Professional Learning Communities play in professional development and school improvement and lead to the increase of implementation of Professional Learning Communities in schools throughout Nebraska.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study and for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study will be published in the researcher's dissertation. No individual research participants, schools, or school districts will be identified in the dissertation. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator at any time, office phone, (402) 768-6117, or after hours (402) 768-2672. Please contact the investigator:

- if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research

Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 for the following reasons:

- you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant
- to voice concerns or complaints about the research
- to provide input concerning the research process
- in the event the study staff could not be reached,

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have

decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to

keep.

_____ Check if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

Signature of Participant:

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)
Thomas Kiburz, Principal Investigator   Office: (402) 768-6117
Larry Dlugosh, Ed.D., Secondary Investigator   Office (402) 472-0975