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The Examination of Real-Life Implementations of Critical Elements in a Professional Learning Community for High-Performing Middle Schools and Low-Performing Middle Schools

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THE EXAMINATION OF REAL-LIFE IMPLEMENTATIONS OF CRITICAL

ELEMENTS IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR HIGH-

PERFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS AND LOW-PERFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

DAMITA GRIFFIN BYNES

(Under the Direction of Deborah Thomas)

ABSTRACT

In a September 2 *Education Week* Commentary, Kahlenberg (2009) identified 5,000 schools across the nation categorized as failing or low-performing schools. A significant amount of attention and resources are dedicated to transform low-performing schools to high-performing schools promoting student achievement. Because of the increasing demand that low-performing schools be turned around, Georgia schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) two consecutive years for the same indicator are placed in Needs Improvement (NI) status and face escalating consequences from the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). In the midst of all of the demands to meet local and state requirements, there were school personnel who made structural or organizational changes by implementing professional learning communities to achieve the desired outcome of improving student achievement and became high-performing schools. Conversely, there were school personnel that made structural or organizational changes by implementing professional learning communities to achieve the desired outcome of improving student achievement, yet remained in low-performing status.

This research focused on six middle schools in Georgia, in which the five critical

elements of a professional learning community were implemented as a response to school reform. Of the six middle schools, three schools were selected because they were recognized as high-performing. Simultaneously, three middle schools were selected because they had yet to meet all of the criteria of a high-performing school and were labeled as low-performing. The researcher examined real-life implementations of critical elements of a professional learning community in these high-performing and low-performing middle schools to determine if there were significant differences or patterns that existed among or between the two groups of schools. This research was approached using a mixed method design. The quantitative data were gathered and analyzed adopting the Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman (2009) survey instrument, *Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised (PLCA-R).* The qualitative data were gathered and analyzed by conducting recorded semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews, observing and documenting PLCs, and collecting and reviewing artifacts.

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DEDICATION

First, this study is dedicated to the six middle schools who participated in this research. This study could not have taken place without the participation of the principals, faculty, and staff.

Second, this study is dedicated to all of the middle schools in Georgia and across the United States, that are being "labeled" low-performing when in actuality, there are high-performing tasks taking place in the school.

Third, this study is dedicated to my program of study professors.

Fourth, this study is dedicated to the following people: Lillian (peer debriefer), Drs. MaryAnn and Shrone (supportive colleagues), Louise and Nita (encouragers and prayer warriors), Mom & Dad Tingle (proofreaders and supportive praying parents), Debra S., Drs. Jessie S., and Ken D. (supportive GAPSS partners), Dr. Dargan (editor), and to the rest of my family members and friends who thought that I had forgotten about them, but remained family and friends anyway.

Finally, to my husband, Lavern this is not only my doctorate degree, it is yours too. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 4:9-10, it reads, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion." You were the one who encouraged me to begin this endeavor. So many times, throughout this entire process, from beginning to end, you did just that – you lifted me. God allowed you truly to be the "wind beneath my wings." Thanks Dr. Honey and I do love you.

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First things first – without God providing me daily the strength, wisdom, talent, creativity, and ability to think, none of this would have been possible. He carefully orchestrated every step along the way. He put me in the right places at the right time with the right people. He allowed me to rest and laugh along the way. God never failed me, He truly did exceedingly, and abundantly above all I could have ever asked or thought. For this, I am grateful.

Secondly, to my committee members – Dr. Thomas, thank you for accepting to be my chair, leading and guiding me throughout the process, yet allowing me to discover my place as the researcher. Thank you for proofreading so quickly, yet challenging my thought process to "leave my opinion" out. Thank you for suggesting the right people combination for the committee in support of this study. Dr. Shepherd, thank you for pointing me in the right directions for conducting search engines to find literature and navigate my way through Iliad and Galileo. Thank you also for advising me to begin writing in the proper format that would be approved as the final submission for the electronic dissertation version. Dr. Mays, thank you for assisting me in formulating my research questions, going the extra mile to obtain a copy of the survey, schooling me on protocol etiquette when visiting the schools and interviewing the participants. Dr. Tysinger, thank you for challenging me to become a statistician. I can truly say I know how to utilize SPSS and examine data. Thank you also for proofreading quickly. Committee members, I thank all of you for the support along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

Educators across Georgia and throughout the United States have felt the pressures of many changes that have taken place in the educational arena. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), adequate yearly progress (AYP), differentiated instruction, Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and Race to the Top (RTT) are a few of the external pressures requiring school personnel to concentrate on increased accountability for student achievement. These pressures also include a sense of urgency to turn around failing schools nationwide.

In a September 2 *Education Week* Commentary, Kahlenberg (2009) identified 5,000 schools across the nation categorized as failing or low-performing schools. Freelance writer Victor Rivero (2009) explained that these low-performing schools represented more than 2.5 million students. Rivero recorded remarks of Louisiana's Recovery School District Superintendent, Paul Vallas, stating that if schools are to be turned around, a model or vision must exist. Vallas and Rees (2010) stated if achievement gaps are to be eliminated, then administrators should look beyond the obvious in transforming the learning and developing of students. Eaker (2002) agreed that just changing the structure of a school is not enough. The culture of the school has to change as well, and that professional learning communities are the best hope for improving schools. Cawelti (2004) suggested in his synthesis of research on high-performing schools, that student achievement increases because of daily classroom high quality, and focused instruction.

In the December 2009 report, *Improving Low-performing Schools,* Caitlin Scott

examined 23 school districts and 48 schools in California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan,

New York, and Ohio that were included in a 5-year study of low-performing schools

restructured under NCLB. This qualitative study was conducted by the Center on

Education Policy (CEP), a nonprofit organization for assistance in developing strategies

for restructuring. Atlanta Public Schools (APS), Grady County School, Muscogee School,

and Stewart School Districts, all in Georgia, were included in this study. These four

districts including five middle schools, one high school, and two academy schools were

able to raise the level of student achievement. During the study in Georgia, Scott (2009)

explained that multiple coordinated improvement strategies evolved during the

restructuring process as achievement levels of students increased. These strategies

included data being used frequently to guide decisions about instruction and students,

teachers working together to design and administer assessments, and schools

implementing small learning communities.

Small learning communities, an alternative approach to school improvement, and

one type of professional learning community (PLC) allowed teachers and administrators

an opportunity to identify collaboratively desired results of promoting and practicing

effective techniques for a better performing school. Additional studies support PLCs as

an effective model of fostering school improvement for teachers, staff, and students

(Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; DuFour, 2010; Hord & Sommers,

2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Senge, 1990, 2006; Stoll, 2007). Cowan (2003) concurred

that PLCs are infrastructures put in place to support school improvement, which ultimately increase the level and quality of student learning.

Although Georgia was recognized as one of six states in which low-performing schools had improved and made slight increases in performance, at the time of this study, 154 middle schools had not met the criteria for AYP. These schools were targeted for restructuring or were in the implementation phase of restructuring. According to Georgia's Department of Education (GaDOE) 2010 AYP Report, 65.3% middle schools met AYP in 2007, 79.5% middle schools met AYP in 2008, 84.5% (393) middle schools met AYP in 2009, and 67.2% (315) middle schools met AYP in 2010. Consequently, these data raised awareness to this researcher and other educational leaders who have an interest in supporting student achievement and desiring all schools to succeed across the nation.

Background of the Study

To support student achievement, President Obama and his administration began promoting professional development for teachers and principals. In Killion's May 2009 news release, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) commended President Obama for allocating funds to support training and professional development for best practices in teacher effectiveness and improving student results. These funds, otherwise known as The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), included implementation of a teacher evaluation system that provided feedback on teacher performance, an intensive redesign of professional development for teachers, and special focus on subject matter.

From January 2002 to October 2004, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funded a project on creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities. Bolam et al. (2005) found PLCs promoted individual and collective professional learning, promoted and sustained school improvement, and promoted student learning. Senge (2006) also recognized that new patterns of thinking and continuous learning were tools and ideas that an organization must possess to produce results and continue to grow. Senge further recognized not only did organizations produce extraordinary results, but individual members of the organization rapidly grew too. These schools of thought and research were aligned with the course of action that President Obama and his administration recommended.

In a June 17, *Education Week* Commentary, U. S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (2009), stated school officials were too content with nominal progress and action, and more aggressive action should be taken to make dramatic changes necessary for schools to improve. Duncan recognized that leaders might not have had the knowledge and skills needed to rise to the occasion of creating a 21st Century School. He stated the unique challenges rural schools faced should not have been an excuse for not improving student achievement. According to Duncan (2009), a strong advocate of complete turnarounds for schools that need restructuring, new and innovative leaders must run the low-performing schools. In addition, bringing in new adults, rearranging the length of the school day and school year, analyzing the curriculum, and revisiting the discipline codes were the best and fastest ways to create a new school culture for student achievement

(Duncan, 2009). Yet, drastic school turnaround strategies were risky wrote David (2010). The federal School Turnaround Grant program required educators in states and districts to use such strategies as closing the low-performing school and reopening as a charter school, closing the school and transferring students to better schools within the district, firing the principal and one-half of the staff, or firing the principal, and overhauling the evaluation of teachers, schedules, and instruction. However, according to David, problems found with those strategies showed that replacing the staff did not lead to improved instruction, had little effect on quality instruction, and turning schools over to charter organizations or outside agencies did not do well either. Furthermore, some urban and rural school districts only had one school, leaving nowhere to transfer students.

Educational leaders such as Fullan (2005), Marzano (2003), and Reeves (2009) conducted considerable research on instructional skills and best practices. Their research showed that good instruction leads to increased student achievement and that student achievement resulted when there was a strong sense of responsibility for the school, for others, and when students had a strong sense of responsibility for themselves. Scott (2009) in accordance with Fullan (2005), Marzano, and Reeves, reported common findings that emerged from case studies of schools restructured in six geographically diverse states. First, all of the case study schools that raised achievement to exit restructuring used multiple, coordinated strategies revised over time. Second, all case study schools that exited restructuring, used data frequently to make decisions about instruction and regrouped students by skill level.

Brady (2003) reported a cascade of interventions useful for turning around a low-performing school. He categorized these interventions as mild, moderate, and strong. Mild interventions require the existing school staff to add programs or initiatives to an existing school structure. Strong interventions require significant changes in existing school structures. This type of intervention seems to be more in harmony with Duncan's (2009) methods of turning schools around. Conversely, moderate interventions require existing school staff to change the basic structures and processes of the schools. This type of intervention is more aligned with the thoughts of Fullan (2005), Marzano (2003), Reeves (2009), and Scott (2009). Regardless of which intervention is chosen, Brady (2003) noted that examination and understanding of what worked for one circumstance of turning schools around might not work for another low-performing school.

Unlike Duncan's (2009) choice of strategies, leaders in schools in New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Maryland, and Georgia chose to intervene moderately. Leaders in these states implemented the concept of PLCs to improve student achievement. Huffman and Hipp (2003) recognized once schools were identified as PLCs, principals, staff, and other stakeholders such as parents, community leaders, and students faced challenges. They admitted all participants had to focus urgent attention to self-examine the root causes and look within and without for the schools' solutions. Huffman and Hipp (2003) explained that this focus required shared beliefs, values and vision, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and its application, shared personal practices, and supportive conditions for relationships and structures.

Hord and Sommers (2008) gleaned these foci as the critical elements or attributes of a PLC. The first critical element, Shared and Supportive Leadership, is defined as decision-making power shared by administrators and faculty. The second critical element, Shared Values and Vision involves staff continuously focusing on their own learning, which produces consistent focus on student learning. A third critical element, Collective Learning and Its Application, is the determination of teachers to identify students' learning needs and apply enhanced instructional techniques in the classroom. The fourth critical element is Shared Personal Practices, where feedback is given and received to support individual and organizational improvement. The fifth critical element, Supportive Conditions, has two components, relational and structural. The relational factors include openness, truth, respect, and caring among the community members. The structural factors include meeting time, meeting place, resources, and policies supportive of collaboration.

Statement of the Problem

According to Gabriel (2005), a new era of accountability forced teachers to examine their classroom practices and behaviors. He stated that good instructional leaders should meet with teachers to brainstorm solutions and strategies to use. Hord and Sommers' (2008) theory was grounded in the idea that a strong relationship existed between professional learning of teachers and desired student learning outcomes. Teachers must be able to conduct the necessary conversations promoting student achievement, must conduct meetings with teachers of the same content and concerns, and

must conduct meetings with administrators to agree upon the work that need to be taught, monitored, and measured.

As written in Collin's (2001) *Good to Great,* the transformation of companies from good-to-great came from within and with consistency. Collins highlighted, transformations evolved from first looking at *who* and then the *what*. The *who* included having the right leader as well as the right people for work. The *what* included confronting the brutal facts, becoming a culture of discipline that focused on the right work, accelerating the role of technology, and loving the work as well as the people.

DuFour (2010) noted that if not all students were succeeding and educators in schools wanted to ensure high levels of learning and continuous improvement, the professional learning community concept would help promote more effective practices. DuFour's experience at Adlai Stevenson High School, the school that put the concept of professional learning community in place, allowed him to see the quality impact upon students and faculty. However, Hord and Sommers (2008) suggested that there were insufficient studies tracing where the outcomes of implementing true professional learning communities were beneficial to both schools and students. In addition, Huffman and Hipp (2003) stated many useful strategies have been integrated into schools, but there was very little documentation of the successes. Senior research scientist and data analyst, Jesse Levin (2010) also found very little research existing between middle school practices and policies and improved academic outcomes.

In Georgia, high-performing schools are schools in which students consistently perform above expectations. Furthermore, the leadership in these high-performing

schools includes strong and effective teachers, staff, and students, who achieve beyond expectations. Whereas, low-performing schools in Georgia are those schools in which students lacked progress in academic achievement over a 2-year period in reading/language arts and math combined. This study was specifically aimed at an examination of actual practices and procedures of the implementation of the five critical elements of a professional learning community that led to the results that influenced student achievement.

Based on the results obtained by various researchers (Bolam et al. (2005); DuFour, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Senge, 1990, 2006; Stoll, 2003), a professional learning community includes five critical elements. First, educators in schools must establish a clear mission and shared goals. Second, principals must share the power and authority of decision-making with all stakeholders. Third, all learning by both principal and teachers must be related to increasing student learning. Fourth, continuous giving and receiving feedback of instructional practices must be the norm. Fifth, both structural conditions and human conditions must exist.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine three low-performing and three high-performing middle schools in Georgia in which the critical elements of a professional learning community had been implemented. The purpose of this examination was to determine whether significant differences existed in the implementation of the critical elements between low-performing and high-performing schools. In addition, this examination was to determine if those differences generated certain practices that promoted student achievement.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, the following research questions applied:

1. Are there significant differences in the implementation of the critical elements of professional learning communities between high-performing and low-performing middle schools?

2. If differences do exist, are there patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools?

Ten additional sub-questions further supported the study. Five of the sub-questions were developed to support the quantitative study in measuring school personnel perceptions of the implementation of each of the critical elements of a professional learning community, in their school. The remaining five sub-questions were developed to support the qualitative study in the researcher's real-life interactions with school personnel of the implementation of each of the critical elements of a professional learning community. All of these sub-questions are presented in the quantitative and qualitative sections of Chapter 3, the Methodology, and the Report of Data and Data Analysis of Chapter 4.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher adopted the three-legged stool (see Figure 1.1) concept of Peter Senge's (1990, 2006) organizations working together as a team and Hord's (2008) *backward map* (see Figure 1.2). Both of these conceptual frameworks were applied to provide visual representations in support of this study.

Core Learning

Capabilities For Teams

Aspiration

- Personal Mastery

- Shared Vision

Understanding Complexity

Systems Thinking

Reflective Conversation

- Mental Models

- Dialogue – Team Learning
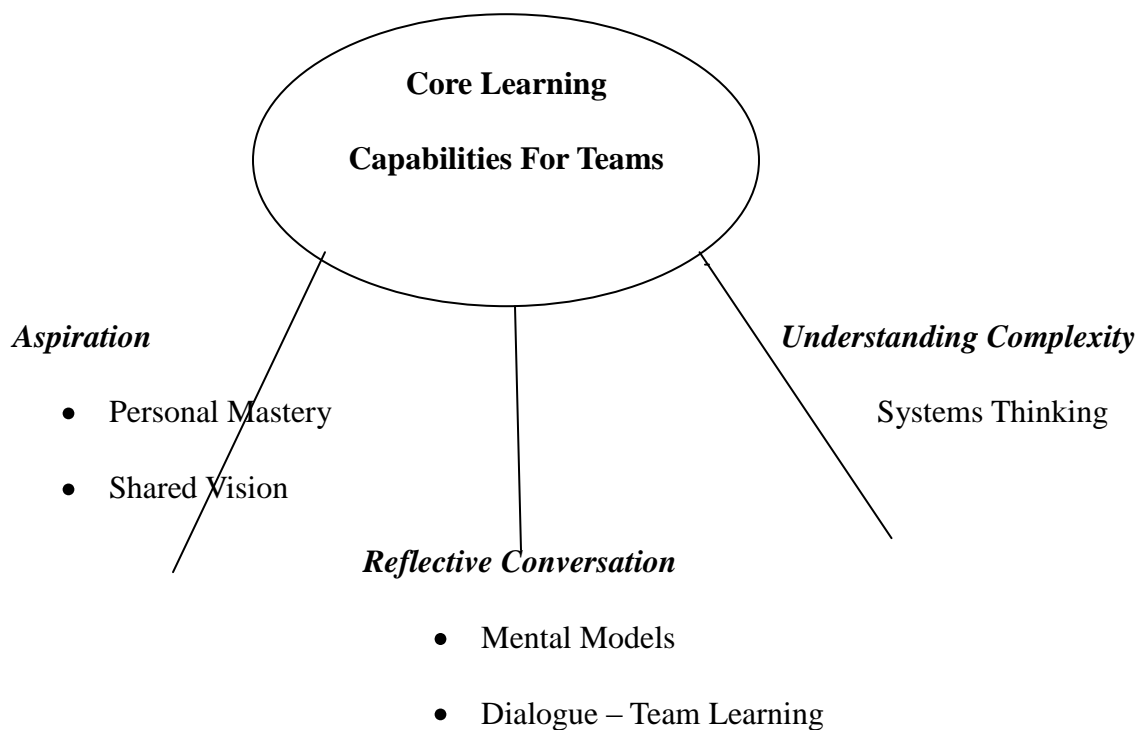
Figure 1.1 Three-Legged Stools: Core Learning Capabilities For Teams

4	3	2	1
Access system resources, policies, leadership, culture of improvement	Design and nurture principal and teacher learning	Specify new principal and teacher knowledge, skills, and behavior	Identify desired student learning outcomes
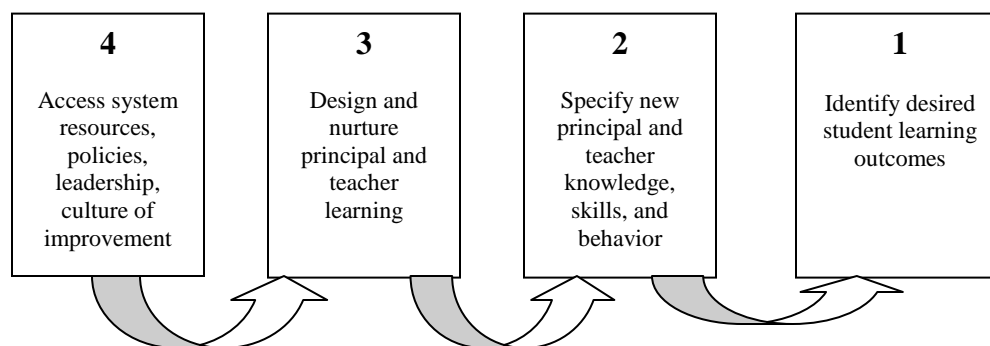
Figure 1.2 Theory of Change: The Relationship Between Professional Learning and
        Student Learning

Theoretical Framework

The theories of Peter Senge (1990, 2006) and Shirley M. Hord (2003, 2008)

guided, supported, and framed this study. In Senge's *The Fifth Discipline,* his theory

destroyed the illusion that separate unrelated forces create an organization. Learning organizations provide people an opportunity to create desired results by expanding their thinking patterns and collaboratively increasing their learning at all levels. Just like there are vital organs to the human body, Senge's theory suggested that there are five basic disciplines vital to a learning organization. These five disciplines are building shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, mental models, and systems thinking.

The first discipline, building shared vision, emerges from personal visions. Senge (1990, 2006) stated that shared vision changes relationships within an organization, allows people to begin to work together, creates a common identity, establishes an overarching goal, provides directions to stay on course, fosters risk taking and experimentation, and fosters long-term commitment. The second discipline, personal mastery, involves continual personal growth and learning, continually clarifies what is important to the path that is being taken, and is a lifelong process. Team learning, the third discipline, emerges a common direction of energy, saves energy from being wasted, and helps to create the team's desired results. Team learning is made up of individuals who master the practices of dialogue and discussion and requires practice. The fourth discipline, mental models, needs to be shared with key decision makers, needs to be used to make crucial decisions for the good of the organization's future, and invokes patterns of change. The fifth discipline, systems thinking, has integrity, has no division, is the framework for interrelationships, is the pattern of change and principles, and is the cornerstone of the organization.

Each of these disciplines builds the organization in order to reach the highest

aspirations. For this reason, stated Senge (1990, 2006), the three-legged stool (see Figure 1.1) would not be able to stand if any of the legs (the disciplines of a learning organization) were missing. Thus, these five disciplines have to develop together in order for a learning organization to function properly.

Hord (2003) embraced the idea of a PLC because it provides a mechanism to promote a community of continuous professional learners, serves as a key element for professional development, improves the educational system, and allows for school-wide frequent and regular discussions for reflecting, assessing, collecting, and making decisions about effective practices within the school. She suggested professional learning communities (PLCs) should involve everyone: administrators, teachers, counselors, media specialists, custodians, and the community, to make changes based on practice, knowledge, and learning to improve student learning. However, stated Hord and Sommers (2008), the staff must think backwards (see Figure 1.2) and must first identify the desired learning outcome for students, and then identify what skills and behaviors the staff needs to know to produce what students need to know and learn. Hord's (2003) theory stated there must be a relationship between professional learning and student learning.

This researcher concluded that the theory of Core Learning Capabilities for Teams in Senge's (1990, 2006) three-legged stool model and Hord's (2003) theory of change, which involves everyone to promote continuous learning, communication, and effective practices, mirrored the five critical elements of a PLC as outlined in this study. The first *leg*, Aspiration, comprised of personal mastery and shared vision directly related to the

critical elements of the PLC, including shared personal practice and Shared Values and Vision being examined in this study. The second *leg,* Understanding Complexity comprised of system thinking, had a direct correlation to the critical element of shared and supportive leadership examined in this study. Finally, the third *leg,* Reflective Conversation comprised of mental models and dialogue directly related to the critical elements of the PLC including supportive conditions and collective learning and application respectively examined in this study.

This researcher recognized high-performing schools reflected the model of the three-legged stool when all of the *legs* or critical elements of a PLC are present and working together. Conversely, the *legs* or all critical elements of a PLC could be present and not working together or any *leg* or critical element of a PLC could be missing, which causes the three-legged stool to fall, resulting in low-performing schools.

Significance of the Study

Even though school leaders and teachers continue as lifelong learners to prepare students in the 21st century, they continue to face challenges in order to meet the demands of AYP at the local, state, and federal levels. Challenges continue to exist in spite of efforts made to improve. Numerous studies have been conducted about professional learning communities promoting shared vision and team building. However, few studies provided insight into the everyday life experiences of how the critical elements, including shared beliefs, values and vision, shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and its application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice actually support a school moving from a low-performing to a high-performing status.

This researcher hoped to gain insight of low-performing and high-performing middle schools in which these critical elements were implemented. The researcher hoped, as a result of this study, to fill the gap which exists in the literature of not having enough real-life implementation of critical elements of a professional learning community in both high-performing and low-performing middle schools that promoted student achievement.

Procedures

This research focused on six middle schools in which the critical elements of a professional learning community were implemented as a response to school reform. Of the six middle schools, three were selected because they had made AYP for three consecutive years and were recognized as high-performing. Simultaneously, three middle schools were selected because they had not made AYP for three consecutive years or were in Needs Improvement (NI) status, and were labeled as low-performing schools. This research was approached using a mixed method design. Given that this study was conducted using a mixed methods approach, Creswell's (2009), four important aspects for consideration, including timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing applied. Concerning timing, the researcher collected the data sequentially. First, adopting Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman's (2009) survey instrument, *Professional Learning Community Assessment – Revised (PLCA-R)* (see Appendix A), the quantitative data were gathered and analyzed to determine if there were differences between high- and low-performing middle schools in which educators had implemented the five critical elements. The researcher accomplished this task by conducting five independent sample t-tests. The analysis of the quantitative data assisted and prepared the researcher to complete the

second portion of research, the qualitative data. These data were gathered by conducting semi-structured focus group interviews, observing real-life professional learning communities, and gathering artifacts. The analysis of these data assisted the researcher in determining if there were differences between high- and low-performing middle schools, which had implemented the five critical elements. Since the quantitative data were collected first, the weighting aspect of the study was quantitative. Thus, the mixing was connecting the data analysis of the quantitative data to the data collection and analysis of the qualitative data, and using the PLCA – R survey to ensure consistency of only studying the five critical elements.

As part of the data collection, the researcher gathered all the participants' (survey respondents and interviewees) signed informed consent documents. To collect and compare characteristics of each of the six middle schools, the researcher gathered the following demographics: number of enrolled students by gender and ethnicity, socio-economic status of status of students, number of employees by gender and ethnicity, average of employees' years of teaching experience, average of employees' years at current school, and number of employees' highest degrees earned.

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Limitations/Delimitations

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Limitations

The factor that might have affected this study was the method of research. This mixed-method approach required extensive data collection, was time sensitive, and was dependent upon the target population. First, the population of schools that were once low-performing, from which to select for conducting the study, was small. Consequently, the

schools that met the criteria might have come from the same region and not in the various regions as the researcher had hoped. Therefore, the results may be applied to participating schools only and may not be generalized for all of the middle schools in Georgia. Second, the survey was administered once, which was before the visit of the selected sites. All certificated school personnel did not complete the survey. In two of the participating schools, the researcher had the opportunity to present the purpose of the study to the principal and some of the members of the leadership team. In another school, the researcher had the opportunity to present the purpose of the study to the entire faculty and staff. In the remaining participating schools, the researcher spoke only with the principal. The differences in how the survey was provided to each school could have possibly resulted in sampling bias. Third, the researcher used the same set of questions at all six schools in conducting semi-structured focus-groups and interviews. This process provided the interviewer and respondents the ability to be flexible and spontaneous. Fourth, the semi-structured focus groups, interviews, and observations were only for the 2-day timeframe specified at the selected sites and did not extend over a period as most desired.

Delimitations

For the purposes of this study, the accessible population consisted of research in only six middle schools in Georgia, three schools that were high-performing and three schools that were low-performing. These middle schools were examined from the sampling frame provided by the GaDOE. The researcher conducted the data collection for only two days at each school.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined:

Instructional leader – Instructional leader is also known as the principal, the academic coach or instructional coach and serves as the facilitator and monitor of professional learning.

Leadership – Leadership is the governance process through which individuals and groups, influence the behavior of others. The individuals and groups work collaboratively to achieve common goals and to promote organizational effectiveness.

Learning organization – Learning organization is an organization that continually, expands its capacity to create its future (Senge, 1990, 2006).

Principal – Principal is the head administrator of the school and serves as the lead learner in the school. The principal exhibits a deep understanding of curriculum, assessment, and instruction, which fosters focused, professional learning.

Professional Learning – Professional Learning is the means by which teachers, administrators, and other school employees acquire, enhance and refine the knowledge, skills, and commitment necessary to create and support high levels of learning for all students.

Sampling Frame – Sampling Frame is the Georgia Department of Education's (GaDOE) published list of Title I high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

School Culture – School Culture is the norms, values, standards, and practices associated with the school as a learning community committed to ensuring student achievement and organizational productivity (GaDOE - GAPSS, 2007).

School Personnel – School Personnel is the collective name given to any hired staff of a school. This may include some or all of the following: principal, assistant principal, school leadership team, all certificated teachers, secretary, custodian, counselor, media specialist, graduation coach, instructional coach, and classified employees, such as paraprofessionals.

Standards Based Classroom (SBC) – The standards based classroom as defined by the GADOE is the classroom where the content standards are posted, visible, and referenced throughout the lesson by both teachers and students. The SBC also requires teachers to consistently and pervasively communicate the language of the standards, in order that students know and understand what to do. Other components include the essential question (EQ), student work with appropriate commentary, and engaging student-focused lessons.

Summary

In Georgia, schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) two consecutive years for the same indicator, are placed in Needs Improvement(NI) status and face escalating consequences from the GaDOE. In the midst of all of the demands to meet local and state requirements, some school personnel made structural or organizational changes such as implementing professional learning communities to achieve the desired outcome of improving student achievement and became high-performing schools. Conversely, there were school personnel who made structural or organizational changes such as implementing professional learning communities to achieve the desired outcome of improving student achievement, yet remained in low-performing status.

The implementation of a Professional Learning Community in some schools in England, throughout the United States, and specifically in Georgia, have been found to transform structures and processes by promoting professional learning for teachers, increasing collaboration, and increasing student achievement. This research focused specifically on six middle schools in Georgia, in which the five critical elements of a professional learning community were implemented as a response to school reform. Of the six middle schools, three schools were selected because they were recognized as high-performing. Simultaneously, three middle schools were selected because they had yet to meet all criteria of a high-performing school and were being labeled as low-performing. The researcher examined the implementation of the five critical elements of a professional learning community to determine if there were significant differences or patterns in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

This research was approached using a mixed method design. The quantitative data (personnel perceptions) were gathered and analyzed adopting the Olivier et al. (2009) survey instrument, *Professional Learning Community Assessment - Revised.* The qualitative data (personnel in their natural settings) were gathered from semi-structured focus groups, interviews, observations, and artifacts to report patterns, practices, and behaviors. The researcher used these data, resulting from the implementation of the five critical elements, to determine if there were differences in high-performing and low-performing schools that led to student achievement.

New American Schools (NAS) found in an evaluation of 550 school reforms that good implementation was more likely to take place in smaller or elementary schools; in

schools where the focus was not on lack of students' skills, parental support, or discipline; in schools where there was teacher efficacy; in schools where there was ongoing support and training provided; in schools where the principal was actively engaged and where there was consistent support at the district level, financially and politically. According to Payne (2008), when meaningful attention was not given to reform implementation, teachers and students were not only harmed, but also poor implementation undermined the possibility for change.

The literature presented in Chapter 2, includes the characteristics and five critical elements of a professional learning community. It also highlights characteristics of high-performing schools that have benefited from implementing the professional learning community's five critical elements effectively. Chapter 2 highlights characteristics of low-performing schools that have turned around after fully implementing the critical elements of a professional learning community effectively. Finally, Chapter 2 highlights characteristics of low-performing schools that have implemented a professional learning community, yet remain low-performing.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

This research evolved over an integration of several studies surrounding critical elements or components of PLCs. Hord's (1997, 2003) research and work at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) revealed that critical elements involved the organization adopting a new model of school culture, becoming an organization that actively supported educational change and improvement, and then showing improvement efforts. Huffman and Hipp (2003) found in their research that the creation of a professional learning community was the most promising approach, where continuous learning, continuously improving instructional practices, and action research or study groups became the norm. The research became convincing when Huffman and Hipp (2003) collaborated with Hord (1997, 2003) to model and help facilitate professional learning community development in schools. This five-year mixed-methodological project entitled *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* involved 12 districts and 22 schools across five states. Huffman, Hipp, and Hord (2003) developed and refined a PLC model to improve student achievement in reading and mathematics in low-performing districts and schools. As a result, six of those schools, were selected because they showed progress while initiating, implementing, and reculturing their schools as communities of learners. This project indicated that the vision might have begun with the principal, but the teachers were the ones who continuously sustained the vision.

Bolam et al. (2005) conducted a 2 ½ year mixed methodological study of professional learning communities in England. This study was aimed at identifying and providing the following: practical examples of the characteristics of effective PLCs in different school settings, key factors in heading PLC development, and the impact of professional learning and innovation practices. Based on their findings, they concurred and concluded that shared values and vision, collaborative focus on learning, collective responsibility for student learning, individual and collective professional learning, and reflective professional learning are certainly critical elements of an effective PLC.

The Professional Learning Community Background

Stoll and Louis (2007) pointed out in their book, *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth, and Dilemmas,* that each word in the phrase, Professional Learning Community is meaningfully important. *Professional* suggested an ethic of service that meets the needs of the client. *Learning* suggested improvement of the service and current practices to the client. *Communities* suggested a culture where teachers collaborate, share, and reflect with each other continuously. While writing about PLCs, Stoll and Louis found the purpose of PLCs ranged from different perspectives to different interpretations; therefore, making it impossible to capture all of the nuances of what makes a PLC work. Yet, throughout their journeying, such words or phrases as wholeness, connection, collective responsibility, transformation, and enhancing student learning continued to be emphasized. Other words or phrases such as time-consuming, dilemmas or challenges, and sustainability also surfaced.

Freelance writer, Ellen Ullman (2009), defined PLCs as a group of educators and community members working together toward a common goal. These groups could be organized in a variety of ways – by subject, by grade level, or by a specialty according to the needs of the school, and the goal can be on any subject of interest.

According to DuFour (2004), one of the developing founders of PLCs, school improvement is significant to educators and PLCs have become more and more popular. However, the original intent of PLCs had begun to lose some of its core mission or principles. One assumption was that PLCs were not just that students were taught, but that students learned. This meant that all professionals in the building pledged and engaged themselves to ensure success for all of the students. Adalai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, created professional learning communities as an intervention for this success. They had three big ideas in mind. First, monitor each student's learning progress or any learning difficulties encountered. Second, create a culture of collaboration, which meant teachers working together in an ongoing cycle to analyze and improve classroom practice. In addition, make time to analyze and discuss data as well as create common assessments. Third, focus on results, which became the routine work of everyone in the school. These big ideas became the foundation for the five critical elements of the professional learning community.

The Critical Elements of a Professional Learning Community

Cowan (2003) articulated that PLCs are clearly connected to school improvement. She identified the critical elements of a PLC as such:

Shared and supportive leadership - decision making being shared, with teachers and staff helping to create the vision, identifying changes to attain the vision, and deciding how to implement and monitor the changes;

Shared values and vision – norms and behaviors of the school are manifested in sharing the responsibility for student learning, communicating regularly, and caring and trusting;

Collective learning – everyone in the school collaborates to create characteristics that are desired in the school and goals are focused, intentional, and urgent;

Shared personal practice – after mutual respect and trust are achieved among staff members, teachers could observe behaviors of their colleagues in order to encourage, debate, discuss, and even disagree. As a result, successes are praised and failures are recognized and shared;

Supportive conditions: Relational conditions - relationships involve teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to administrator, and student to administrator where a culture of respect and trust is built; Structural conditions – collaborations have a specific time and location for alliance. Thus, when all of these critical elements are in place and developed along the way, these traits tend to reflect the characteristics of a high-achieving school (see Figure 4.1).

The Characteristics of High-Performing Schools

Hawley and Rollie (2002) participated in the Keys to Excellence in Your Schools (KEYS) research conducted by the National Education Association (NEA). This initiative was based on investigations of organizations and schools that affected student achievement by changing the school's structure and organizational patterns. They found that all students within the school experienced the quality of teaching and learning. From this research, they found that education reform was essential in creating effective schools, and needed continuous improvement. In their studies, they found that the indicators of school quality and high student achievement consisted of the following:

1. Multi-dimensional environments

2. Clear, explicit, and shared continuously goals, mission, and objectives

3. Shared understanding of expected student outcomes

4. Commitment from both parent and school employees

5. Central and building administrators were committed to long-range improvement continuously

6. Students had the right conditions to achieve

7. Teachers were involved in selecting materials and resources

8. Everyone was involved in seeking, identifying, and eliminating barriers to successful academic improvement

9. Training was based on what was needed to improve student performance. Teamwork and pedagogy were emphasized

10. Continuous evaluation was system focused and not individually focused

11. Communication was non-threatening and continuous

12. Multiple forms of assessment were used and not just standardized tests

Overall, the structural and organizational features were vital to the teaching and learning conditions, which ultimately influenced student achievement.

Corallo and McDonald (2002) reported responses from participants at an international colloquium hosted by the Regional Educational Laboratory at Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), Incorporation and its partner, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, of what works in developing high-performing schools. The participants included AEL research members, development staff Andy Hargreaves and Amanda Datnow of OISE, and a cadre of other researchers from the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. From their qualitative research-based studies, it was concluded that low-performing schools could succeed despite the community poverty. Based on the discussions of the researchers, Corallo and McDonald (2002) reported that student population was not an excuse for low performance. They reported the low-performing schools that succeeded included three major characteristics. The first characteristic included a strong focus and cohesion of instruction. This meant that the curriculum was aligned with the standards of the school system. The second characteristic included strong plans to improve student achievement. These plans used focused planning and student data to improve student learning. The third characteristic included a strong collaboration of all staff personnel and administrators. This meant that the organization of the school day was developed for teachers to collaborate. Finally, all of these plans of actions were not only communicated

within the school, but throughout the community (e.g., parents, businesses, and industries).

Fleming and Kleinhenz's (2007) shared their own personal experiences in a dialogue with other educational leaders and experienced school principals. Fleming, a former principal of Bellfield Primary School located in West Ivanhoe, Victoria in Australia, revealed three essential components of what it took to lead change in school culture to produce a high-performing school. First, it was clear that the staff had to believe that all students could be high performers. Second, the curriculum was effective when teachers were held accountable for teaching and learning, when instruction was explicit, and when effective relationships existed between students and teachers. Third, it was clear that both students and teachers had high expectations of academic achievement, high expectations of student behavior, and student values. During the discourse of this session, the experienced school leaders and principals further highlighted that the high-performing schools, established a professional learning community. They observed and experienced the following effective practices: strong use of student achievement data; intense, explicit, structured, and sequential delivery of instruction; differentiated instruction, and rigorous benchmarks for all students. In addition, strong accountability measurements were in place for both students and teachers. Furthermore, high expectations of student performances and professional development were clearly linked to student achievement. In *Creating Collaborative Cultures*, Kohm and Nance (2009) wrote about teachers working towards a common goal, exercising creative leadership

together, and taking responsibility for helping all students to learn in the high-performing schools.

In conclusion, high-performing schools exhibited the following common characteristics: stakeholder involvement with shared expectations, high expectations, clear expectations, continuous communication of those expectations, data-driven based on expectations, and accountability of expectations. These high-performing schools not only promoted effective instruction and produced the desired results of increasing student achievement, and shared leadership, but also validated the effectiveness of implementation of the critical elements as outlined in a PLC.

The Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools

Corallo and McDonald (2002) reported that there was some correlation of poverty communities and schools that were identified as low-performing schools. Some characteristics that they captured included schools with low expectations for student achievement, high teacher absenteeism, and high rates of teacher turnover.

Glaser (2006) of Sullivan and Glanz's *Building Effective Learning Communities – Strategies for Leadership, Learning & Collaboration,* identified low-performing schools that made changes in leaps and bounds, met state and federal standards, but was still labeled failing under the NCLB system. As these low-achieving schools struggled, more of the time was spent drilling for the test and not teaching the content. In fact, based on his observation, the optimal professional learning community did not exist in many schools. He determined that this was due to several reasons: Uncommitted individuals, leaders without vision, and mistakes made without perseverance and staying the course.

Glaser found that low-performing schools worked in isolation; therefore, little or no collaboration took place in regards to curriculum or instructional practices.

Rollie (2002) established that both high-performing schools and low-performing schools had implemented professional learning communities to address the struggle to improve student achievement. However, with the low-performing school, teachers were doing the right things, but expectations of success were low. Teachers were unaware of other teachers' instructional practices. Teachers were pre-occupied with other tasks and goals for schooling that caused them to lose sight of the priority and the quality of student learning. Furthermore, there was little or no preparation for rigorous instruction or assessment, and teachers avoided high standards of performance. Finally, in the low-performing schools, teachers did not have relationships with their students. Kohm and Nance (2009) also wrote how teachers worked in isolation in the low-performing schools and blamed parents and administrators for the failure of students. Consequently, the school culture demonstrated minimal expectations.

In conclusion, low-performing schools depicted the following common characteristics: Minimal stakeholder involvement for shared expectations, low expectations, unclear expectations, minimal communication of expectations, little or no collaboration, lack of preparation, and very little accountability of expectations. These low-performing schools not only had less than effective instruction, but also substantiated the ineffectiveness of implementation of a collaborative culture versus a top-down culture (see Figure 2.1).

In Collaborative Cultures	In Top-Down Cultures
Teachers support one another's effort to improve instruction	Teachers discourage challenges to the status quo
Teachers take responsibility for solving problems and accept the consequences of their decisions	Teachers depend on principals to solve problems, blame others for their difficulties, and complain about the consequences of decisions.
Teachers share ideas. As one person builds on another's ideas, a new synergy develops.	Ideas and pet projects belong to individual teachers. As a result, development is limited.
Educators evaluate new ideas in light of shared goals that focus on student learning.	Ideas are limited to the "tried and true" – what has been done in the past.

Adopted from Creating Collaborative Cultures (Kohm & Nance, 2009)

Figure 2.1 Collaborative Cultures vs. Top-Down Cultures

The Characteristics of Successful Turnarounds

However, it is possible that a low-performing school can turn around successfully if all of the PLC characteristics and processes are in place. Freeport Intermediate School (FIS) of Freeport, Texas (60 miles south of Houston) is one such middle school that transformed their school from a low-performing school to a national model for academic achievement. FIS has been recognized by the national Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, as a National Blue Ribbon School, and as a National School to watch. Using the PLC model, they involved all stakeholders and created a culture of teamwork. At the time of recognition, Principal Clara Sale-Davis of FIS, indicated that everyone in the building worked together to improve student achievement, did not make excuses, and had to believe that all students could be successful. Their mission, Whatever It Takes

continues to be a constant reminder that when students are educated in a supportive environment, academic excellence is promoted.

Rivero (2009) in his discussions with Vallas, Superintendent of Recovery School District (RSD) in Louisiana, discovered five essential characteristics of successful schools that turned around. First, it was very clear who had the authority to act on behalf of the best teaching and learning for the children, staffing, scheduling, budget, and curriculum. Second, it was clear that there was a focus on hiring the best teachers and retaining those teachers with the appropriate staff development. Third, the principal was not the only one seen as the leader, but there was an effective team of leaders. Fourth, time for collaboration was scheduled daily and throughout the school year. Fifth, specific designed, personalized research-based programs and related social services were integrated to meet the academic and social needs of students. Vallas recognized that schools might have differed across districts, but the process was the same – in the first year they gained stability and the in the second year they got busy on the reform.

Richard F. Elmore (2002) highlighted the studies of Gregory R. Anrig, Professor of Educational Leadership at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and director and research contributor of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). Funded by the U. S. Department of Education, CPRE is comprised of five of the nation's leading research institutions. Harvard University is one of those institutions. Working with 30 to 40 school districts nationwide, including, Boston, Chicago, and New York, Elmore's research focused on the effects of federal, state, and local education policies on schools and classrooms.

Elmore (2002) found that local school districts and instructional improvement training had been typically in isolation from the classroom of the teacher. When graduate work or professional development took place, the learning was detached, treated as a separate staff function, or just simply disconnected. However, teachers were expected to know how to apply the learning in the classroom. Elmore witnessed a working model in an urban school system. He discovered that teachers had learned to teach, changed their teaching practices, and were engaged in new forms of practice in front of the experts. He also found that teachers had observed others and videotaped themselves to analyze their practices. In addition, professional developments were focused and connected to specific classroom practices that were effective for meeting the requirements for student learning. Valli and Hawley (2002) discovered that school improvement and teacher learning was facilitated by collaborative cultures. When educators worked together to address the concerns, causes and potential solutions were identified. They had to agree that professional development needed to take place beyond the school to obtain new ideas and knowledge.

Rivero (2009) wrote that the low-performing schools that turned around portrayed these characteristics: (a) small, personalized, and safe, (b) high expectations for all students, (c) extensive professional development and accountability with local control, (d) participative parents, (e) maximized funding for the classroom, and (f) extended schools hours. Teachers who had a strong collaborative culture behaved differently from those who depended on the conditions to be created by the administrators. Furthermore,

they found collaboration increased, accelerated change fostered a positive working climate, and teachers became more effective the more they knew.

In conclusion, according to Glaser (2006), if schools were going to improve, learning has to be valued above anything else. Teachers had to share ideas and learn from each other. They had to support one another in the classroom as well as collaborative meetings. Finally, dialogue had to be on reflective practices where teachers examined the issues that were of greatest concern. Based on a study at Marylin Avenue Elementary School in Livermore, California, Bernhardt (2009) reminded educators that schools must bring all the data together and look at the data carefully. They must review it and understand it. If schools were to improve continuously, individuals must look for the commonalities, look at the processes, look at formative assessments as well as summative assessments, and look at the vision. If student achievement was to occur in schools, teachers and leaders must look at every grade level, every content area, and every group of students. Student achievement is not based on what one thinks, but based on shared vision, shared knowledge, shared leadership, shared practice, and is learned by doing.

Sergiovanni (2000) concurred that if teachers wanted to advance learning and have a successful school, they must know more, and become more skilled. He stated that the ultimate factor in determining if a school is effective or successful or not, is depended upon the teachers. He too stated that there must be diverse people for a common cause. He affirmed that covenantal community with shared ideas, shared principles, shared purpose, and shared fellowship must exist to have a successful school.

Summary

This chapter provided several examples and discussions where proper implementation of the five critical elements was crucial to school improvement and increased student learning. These success stories and discussions were a result of research conducted in schools in Australia, England, throughout the United States, and in Georgia. The success stories and discussions included research done at elementary, middle, and high schools that were once low-performing.

According to Rollie (2002), several similar characteristics of high-performing schools surfaced. First, the school culture was one of high expectations, respect, and trust. Second, schools had a clear mission and goals that were shared and communicated continuously. Personnel were hired because of their commitment to the mission and goals of the school. Third, teachers and students understood the mission, goals, and expectations of learning. Fourth, teachers not only collaborated to improve instruction, but also were involved in the decision making process as to what professional learning was needed based on the data analysis of student performance. Fifth, students were assigned multiple forms of assessments. Finally, the effective schools supported teachers by creating schedules for quality instruction, common planning time, peer observations, and common professional development.

Fullan (2002) also contributed to Hawley and Rollie's study and noted that continuous improvement could not happen unless learning took place at both the school and district level. He noted that everyone must become assessment literate and teachers must examine student work with other teachers. Professional Learning Communities

(PLCs) + Instructional Practices = Student Learning. A learning organization must continually acquire and understand new knowledge and skills to improve. Fullan (2002) stated that there must be system wide accountability and support of instructional practices.

While reviewing the literature, it was clear that the high-performing schools and the turn-around schools had not only embraced the professional learning community concept and implemented the critical elements, but portrayed clear evidence of shared leadership, emphasized collaboration, and involved staff. These schools were student-centered, academically rich, diversely rich, and fostered collegial interaction and creative problem solving. In addition, there was extensive staff development that emphasized practical instructional techniques. However, it was quite the opposite with the low-performing schools, or failing schools; PLCs might have been implemented, but based on the research of the literature, accountability of the critical elements were not implemented thoroughly. In many cases, the PLC language was not spoken, monitoring and evaluating the impact of professional learning was rare, and follow-up action on good practices was minimized.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for conducting additional research in six of Georgia's high-performing and low-performing middle schools that implemented the five critical elements of a professional learning community. This study's examination was designed to provide the researcher further insight in determining if there were significant differences of the implementation of the five critical elements of a professional learning community, and if there were any patterns that might have existed among the six schools.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Few studies that traced the outcomes of professional learning communities have found the implementation of the five critical elements beneficial to both schools and students (Hord & Sommers, 2008). This study was aimed specifically at an examination of actual practices and procedures that influenced student achievement. The review of literature highlighted five critical elements of a professional learning community: When schools established a clear mission and shared goals, when principals shared the power and authority of decision-making with all stakeholders, when all learning by both principal and teachers was related to increasing student learning, when structural and human conditions existed, and when continuous giving and receiving of feedback for instructional practices was the norm, professional learning communities were created (Eaker, 2002).

Cowan (2006) noted, however, that the work at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas, confirmed that the creation of professional learning communities did not stop there; the desired result was increasing student learning. For the purposes of this study, the researcher developed the following research questions:

1. Are there significant differences in the implementation of the critical elements of professional learning communities between high-performing and low-performing middle schools?

2. If differences do exist, are there patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools?

Research Design

To determine if there were differences between high-performing middle schools and low-performing middle schools in which educators had both implemented the critical elements of a professional learning community, the researcher used a concurrent mixed methods research approach. According to Creswell (2009), mixed methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative research and allows results from one method to help with participants and questions for the other method. A mathematical technique to organize and summarize the numerical data from the quantitative research, known as descriptive statistics and the comparisons of means and the reporting of statistical significance of findings, known as inferential statistics (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007), provided the researcher the perception strength (the attitudes and opinions of the selected population, gathered from the survey), of the implementation of critical elements of a professional learning community in high-performing and low-performing middle schools. Observations, semi-structured focus groups, interviews, and document reviews, qualitative research techniques provided the researcher the real-life strengths (face-to-face interactions in the natural settings of the population) in the implementation of critical elements of a professional learning community in high-performing and low-performing middle schools. Combining the data from both the quantitative and qualitative research allowed the researcher to cross-validate perceptions with reality to determine if there were significant differences and patterns between the two groups of schools.

Population and Sample

In Georgia, 16 Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) provide support services to public schools. The researcher contacted three RESAs to assist in identifying schools that met the researcher's criteria. The criteria for selecting schools was to identify six middle schools in which professional learning communities (PLCs) had been implemented as a response to restructuring to meet the demands of improving student achievement. Once schools were identified, the researcher selected three high-performing middle schools once in NI status and had made AYP for three or more consecutive years. These schools were known as Commended or Distinguished Title I Schools because of their transition from a low-performing to high-performing status. Likewise, three middle schools with similar demographics as the high-performing schools were selected, because these schools were classified as low-performing. These low-performing schools were also schools in which the PLC concept had been implemented, yet still lacked progress in academic achievement for two consecutive years or more in student achievement in the areas of reading/language arts, math, or in both areas. For surveys, semi-structured focus groups, interviews, and observations, the human subject population consisted of the principals, assistant principals, teachers, counselors, graduation coaches, instructional coaches, and media specialists employed in the selected schools.

Quantitative Phase

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Quantitative Research Sub-questions

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The researcher developed the following sub-questions to support the analysis of the quantitative phase of the research:

1. Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of Shared Values and Vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

2. Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing school different? If so, how?

3. Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle school and a low performing middle school different? If so, how?

4. Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing school different? If so, how?

5. Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Quantitative Research Method

After the RESAs identified the schools that met the researcher's criteria, each superintendent or the principal of the school districts was contacted via a phone call followed by a formal letter (see Appendix B). This letter outlined the intent of the research, brief procedures of the research, and requested permission to conduct the research. Four of the six superintendents of the school districts responded that participating in the research was at the principal's discretion. The other two principals

requested a copy of the preliminary interview questions and a copy of the survey

instrument. The researcher consented to this request and informed the principals that

changes could be made during the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Georgia Southern

University's approval process (see Appendix C), and they would be notified of such

changes. After permission was granted and protocol was established, the researcher

further explained the process of the research. Next, timeframes were arranged with the

principals for conducting and collecting the surveys. At that time, the researcher provided

an explanation of how the survey instrument would be administered.

The researcher adopted an existing survey instrument to examine the school

personnel perceptions of the implementation of the critical elements of a PLC. The

survey (see Appendix A) was a 4-point Likert scale, entitled a *Professional Learning*

Communities Assessment - Revised (PLCA – R) developed by Olivier et al. (2009). An

email was submitted to Olivier et al. (2009) to request permission to use the PLCA – R

survey, and permission was granted (see Appendix D).

The analysis of the PLCA-R with a subscale (n = 1209) prior to this study

revealed the following reliability coefficients, including Shared and Supportive

Leadership of .94; Shared Values and Vision of .92; Collective Learning and Application

of .91; Shared Personal Practice of .87; Supportive Conditions-Relationships of .82;

Supportive Conditions-Structure of .88; and a one-factor solution of .97 (adopted from

Dianne Olivier's *Assessing Schools as Professional Learning Communities Symposium,*

paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Louisiana Research Association in

Lafayette, March 2009).

Cronk (2008) indicated that an item-total correlation of 0.7 or greater is considered the desirable reliability coefficient. Thus, the reliability of this survey instrument proved to be well above the acceptable coefficient rate for the factored subscales. However, once analysis of the research data were completed, the researcher also used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Analyze Scale feature to conduct a reliability analysis of the PLCA – R survey instrument used during this study to compare the 52-items survey analysis to Olivier's (2009) reported study.

Each school received a packet for the total number of certificated staff as reported by the principal. Each packet contained a cover letter to the participants (see Appendix E), which explained the intent of the research and formally invited them to participate. In addition, the packet contained the directions for completing the survey and securing the documents, a copy of the survey instrument, a blank scantron form, a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix F), a 10 X 13 unsealed security envelope in which to place the completed scantron, a # 10 unsealed security envelope in which to place the signed informed consent form, and a #2 pencil for completing the scantron. A large envelope was provided to the principal or designee to return the sealed envelopes with surveys and scantrons and the sealed envelopes with signed consent forms to the researcher.

This survey was administered before the site visits to the six selected middle schools. This 52-item instrument based on a four-point scale from strongly disagrees to strongly agree was used to answer the first over-arching research question and supporting quantitative sub-questions . With this survey, the researcher was able

to assess the school personnel's perceptions about the implementation of the five critical elements of a professional learning community. The first 11 items assessed the participants' perception on Shared and Supportive Leadership. The next nine items assessed Shared Values and Vision. Items 21- 30 assessed Collective Learning and Application, Items 31-37 assessed Shared Personal Practices, and Items 38-52 assessed Supportive Conditions (structural and relational) as they were implemented in each of the middle schools.

The researcher used the statistical computer analysis from SPSS to help test the research questions as well as provide frequency information such as means and standard deviations for both independent and dependent variables. The researcher identified middle school as the independent variable (IV) with two levels, low-performing middle schools and high-performing middle schools. The researcher identified the five critical elements as the dependent variables (DV).

Quantitative Data Collection

Survey

The quantitative data were collected first. The PLCA – R was delivered to each of the middle school principals for distribution to the certificated faculty and staff. Once the surveys were completed, the principals or principal's designee notified the researcher via phone to arrange to have the completed surveys picked up. The quantitative data collected from the surveys (PLCA-R responses and demographics) were entered into SPSS to perform the following statistical operations: the frequency command for the descriptive statistics, the reliability analysis command for measuring the internal

consistency of the survey responses, and the independent-samples *t* test command to calculate the mean sores of the five critical elements for the high- and low-performing middle schools. According to Gall et al. (2007), SPSS is the most powerful and commonly used statistical software for data analysis.

Response Rate

Before distributing the survey packets, the researcher spoke with the principal about the number of certificated personnel in the school. Knowing the number of certificated personnel assisted the researcher in maintaining a more accurate count of returned survey responses during the data analysis phase. All certificated personnel from each of the six middle schools were invited to participate in the PLCA – R. In the cover letter to the participants, the researcher provided an overview of the study, an outline of the process of the study, instructions for completing the survey, and the deadline for surveys to be returned to the principal or principal's designee. The researcher desired to reach a return rate of at least 80% from each selected school sites. Gall et al. (2007) suggested when participants are contacted before the survey and provided with information about the significance of the study, assurances regarding the confidentiality of the data obtained, and information regarding how the results of the study will be used, the return rate of the survey increases.

Qualitative Phase

Qualitative Research Sub-questions

The researcher had developed the following sub-questions to support the qualitative phase of the research:

1. Is the implementation of Shared Values and Vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing school different? If so, how?

2. Is the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low performing school different? If so, how?

3. Is the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

4. Is the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low performing middle school different? If so, how?

5. Is the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Qualitative Research Method

Once approval was granted from IRB (see Appendix C), timeframes were arranged with the principals for the dates of the 2-day site visit to each of the middle schools. The researcher worked with each principal's designee to obtain the following items: a map of the school, a copy of the master schedule, a listing of the faculty and staff to be surveyed or interviewed, and the location of the room to be used for interviews. Furthermore, the researcher had access to the following items: the school improvement plan (SIP), PLC meeting agendas, minutes and attendance record of attendees from

previous meetings, team notebooks, teachers' lesson plans, and school performance data used to determine AYP status for 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Based on the school schedules and conversations with the principal or principal's designee, the researcher was able to plan dates for the PLC observations and each of the audio-taped semi-structured focus groups and interviews. For each of the six schools, the researcher planned observations of the PLCs on the first day of the visit and interviews on the second day of the visit. During each of the PLC observations, the researcher captured conversations in the natural settings, interacting casually at times with the participants.

During the interviews, the principals and assistant principals (APs) were interviewed separately. Where there were two or more APs at a school, the researcher interviewed the AP that was available during the site visit. For all of the other school personnel, the researcher interviewed each grade level and exploratory (connections) personnel in semi-structured focus group settings. Outlining the purpose of the research, all focus group participants were invited formally via a letter (see Appendix E) to partake in the research. All focus group participants were interviewed during their normal planning time. Participants who did not have a specified planning period were invited to join one of the planning groups or interview after school per direction from the principal. The researcher's contact information was provided in the invitation. Interviewees were asked to respond to the researcher via email only if they were not willing to participate in the study. Gall et al. (2007) explained that conducting focus group interviews allows representatives from each subgroup to be represented adequately in the research sample.

Furthermore, this approach allows the interaction as a group to stimulate the participants to answer more freely, drawing from the responses of others.

The researcher had a minimum of five to eight school personnel participating in each focus group interview. At the time of each interview, the researcher provided a copy of the agenda (see Appendix G) and the interview protocol (see Appendix H) to the interviewees. The agenda gave participants an opportunity to get familiar with the questions and establish rapport with the researcher. The researcher asked for a volunteer from each of the focus group interviews and explained that the volunteer would be the person from the group to review a summary of the transcribed interview for accuracy and completeness. Gall et al. (2007) identifies this sound research strategy as member checking. Once the interviewees completed a review of the questions, an informed consent form (see Appendix F) was provided for signature to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher made it clear to the participants that names would not be used in the transcriptions. Finally, the researcher reminded participants that names or other identifying descriptors would not be used in the presentation of the data or in the final study.

Research Notebook

Qualitative researchers capture the full essence of the subjects by having certain tools to assist them. One tool is some type of notebook or log. This researcher created a notebook for each school and labeled them A, B, C, D, E, and F; and maintained a log of all of the people, places, events, activities, and communications that surrounded this research for each of the six middle schools. During each of the site visits, PLC

observations, and interviews, the researcher's thoughts, reflections, emerging patterns, or personal reactions at the selected school sites were captured in each of the respective six logs. Furthermore, the school logs served as documentation to assist the researcher during the collection, analysis, and reporting phase of the data.

Observations

First, the researcher conducted observations of professional learning meetings. The observations were developed to support the second over-arching research question and qualitative research sub-questions . Planning time in most of the six school sites were divided by grade levels, including sixth, seventh, eighth, and connections or exploratory classes. Thus, the researcher was able to observe groups during professional learning times. Some professional learning communities took place during regular school hours and others took place immediately after school. The researcher used the research notebook to document participants' conversations and observations of behaviors, which directly correlated to the implementation of Shared Values and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and its Application, Shared Personal Practices, and Supportive Conditions (relational and structural) during professional learning time. Pre-labeled pages in the research notebook provided space for comments on each of the critical elements, using the PLCA-R items as outlined in the survey instrument to support consistency and minimized unbiased note-taking.

Interviews

Second, the researcher conducted audio-taped semi-structured focus groups and audio-taped individual interviews. The interviews were developed to support the second over-arching qualitative research question and sub-questions . At the time of the interviews, the researcher provided a copy of the agenda (see Appendix G) and the interview protocol to each of the interviewees (see Appendix H). The agenda gave all participants an opportunity to get familiar with the questions and establish a rapport with the researcher. Once the interviewees completed the review of the questions, an informed consent form (see Appendix F) was provided for their signature as another measure to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher asked for a volunteer to member check the interview summary as captured from the transcripts for accuracy and completeness (Gall et al., 2007).

The researcher made sure that directions about how the interview would be conducted were given to the interviewees. The research notebook was available to the researcher to make notes of interviewees' responses from the prepared questions that led to questions not originally prepared as part of the interview protocol. With the interview questions, the researcher was able to ascertain the five critical elements of a professional learning community, including Shared Values and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and Application, Supportive Conditions (structural and relational), and Shared Personal Practices as they had been implemented in each of the middle schools. To avoid any biases from the researcher and to ensure consistency of gathering the necessary information pertaining to the five critical elements during the

observations and interviews, the researcher often referenced the PLCA-R (see Appendix A) instrument that was used for conducting the surveys, and adapted the questions from Huffman and Hipp's (2003) study. An interview agenda (see Appendix G) and an interview protocol (see Appendix H) were used at each of the six selected site visits.

Artifacts

Third, the researcher examined and constructed notes from the artifacts such as the school improvement plan (SIP), PLC meeting agendas, PLC minutes, student work samples, progress monitoring sheets, lesson plans, team notebooks, team planning meetings, and school performance data. Yet again, the researcher looked for information that correlated directly to the implementation of Shared Values and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and its Application, Supportive Conditions (structural and relational), and Shared Personal Practices, as outlined in the PLCA – R survey.

<p align="center">**Qualitative Data Collection**</p>

Pseudonyms were pre-assigned for each of the middle schools to identify the survey data and findings of the interviews, observations, and artifacts. To identify the six schools, the researcher utilized the first six letters of the alphabet A, B, C, D, E, and F, and assigned them to the six middle schools. On the first day of arrival to each school, the researcher met with the principal to reiterate the reason for the visit, discussed the process to determine if there were any concerns, and observed the professional learning community meetings in action. On the second day of the visit, the researcher conducted audio-taped focus group interviews with teachers and reviewed school artifacts and

documents. In addition, face-to-face interviews were conducted with pre-identified

school personnel such as the principal, assistant principal, media specialist, instructional

leader, and counselor(s) as they were available.

The researcher collected the following data about procedures and dialogue:

1. Planning for instruction, curriculum, and assessment

2. Analyzing student work

3. Identifying professional learning needs

4. Determining teachers' support from administration

5. Decision-making by leadership

6. Dialogue supporting a culture of socialization, fostering empowerment, and risk-taking

7. Impacting of critical elements on future issues and challenges.

At the end of each site visit, the researcher wrote in the research notebook a brief

summary of data collected and documents reviewed, as well as field contacts made. This

brief summary assisted the researcher in determining and guiding subsequent data

collection and data analysis. At the end of each site visit, the researcher transcribed and

summarized the recorded interviews. These transcribed summaries were provided to each

of the focus group volunteers for a review of content accuracy and completeness. All

focus group volunteers were told that this summary was for their eyes only, and they

consented. The principals also received a summarized copy of their own interview for a

review of content accuracy and completeness. The principal and the volunteers were

informed that if any corrections needed to be made to the summaries, they would email

the researcher. Utilizing the member checking strategy, the researcher received responses from only two persons involving corrections: a grammatical change, a rephrasing of a sentence pertaining to PLCs, and a correction on the meeting date of PLCs. In addition, several accolades were received from principals and volunteers congratulating the researcher for the accuracy of information captured and the manner in which the summaries were written. The researcher communicated to all participants that a final analysis of the data of the school as well as the completed study would be provided to the principal for dissemination upon completion and approval of the research from the researcher's dissertation committee.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

According to Creswell (2009), data analysis and interpretation of information should be presented in a series of steps. Utilizing this approach allowed the reader to examine how each step would lead to another to complete the data analysis procedures. The data analysis procedures were broken into two phases, quantitative and qualitative, because this researcher conducted a mixed-method study.

Quantitative Phase

First, the researcher reported the demographic profile of each of the six middle schools. The researcher used tables to represent the student and teacher demographics and observations and interviews of each school. The researcher used a table to report the overall demographics of the principals by school as collected from the surveys. The researcher used a table to report the number of participants who responded and who did

not respond to the survey. The researcher used a table to report the overall demographic survey responses by participant type.

Second, the researcher used SPSS to calculate and summarize the frequency distribution of each of the 52-items survey. The researcher examined the number of responses, the type of responses, and the number of non-responses for each survey item. This procedure helped the researcher to acquire a preliminary overview of the schools, and helped the researcher to begin to determine patterns among and between the six middle schools.

Third, the researcher compared the PLC critical elements (data points) implemented in the high-performing middle schools (Group 1) to the PLC critical elements implemented in the low-performing middle schools (Group 2). Since the researcher compared two groups with data points that directly corresponded within each other and were measured by the same instrument, the researcher used SPSS's Analyze Compare Means feature to conduct the five independent samples *t-test*. The independent samples *t-test* assisted the researcher in analyzing the perceptions of three high-performing middle schools and three low-performing middle schools that implemented the five critical elements of a PLC.

Qualitative Phase

To accomplish the process of this portion of data analysis, the researcher had to first cluster the IV data into two groups. Group 1 represented all of the data gathered from the high-performing middle schools. Within this group, the data was sub-grouped by interviews, observations, field notes, and notes gathered from a review of documents and

artifacts. Within each of these sub-groups, the researcher then created sub-domains of data gathered by each population interviewed and observed according to the five critical elements, the DVs. Likewise, Group 2 represented all of the data gathered from the low-performing middle schools and was grouped identical to Group 1. This approach helped to ensure reliability and consistency for the process and across the study. The researcher used Microsoft Word and the qualitative analysis software, NVivo9, to assist in organizing the data from the observations and interviews. All data were maintained in a secured central location on a computer database.

The researcher read the transcripts several more times to look for interrelating categories of data from the summarized interview transcripts, summarized observations, and gathered documents in the high-performing group. Likewise, the same processes applied for the low-performing group, including identifying interrelated categories of data from the summarized transcripts, summarized observations, and reviewed documents.

The purpose of this study was to examine the real-life implementation of the five critical elements in a PLC in high-performing and low-performing middle schools. Therefore, the researcher began analyzing the data by first using the five critical elements as a guide. During the data analysis, patterns began to emerge. Other descriptive data that emerged included information such as number of enrolled students and their ethnicity, number of employees by title, and number by gender and ethnicity.

In addition, when there were any actual quotes captured or specific artifacts or evidence gathered or observed, the researcher referenced them as well. This process

required constant reflection on the part of the researcher. Once the researcher categorized and described all of the data, a narrative along with an outline was developed to assist in conveying the analysis of the data. As the outline evolved, the researcher created tables to further depict or explain the data.

To make certain there were no biases from the researcher's point of view, when summarizing the qualitative data (interviews, observations, artifacts, and field notes), the researcher secured a peer debriefer to assist in the process of reading and interpreting the data. A retired educator, this peer debriefer has a BS in Nursing, a MS in Adult Education, and taught Healthcare Science Technology at the High School level for 29 years. The peer debriefer had access to the data on school performance, student and personnel demographics, audio-tapes of the interviews, transcripts from the interviews, transcripts from the PLC observations, artifacts, and log notebook of field notes from each of the schools. From these data reviews, the peer debriefer assisted the researcher in developing accurate summaries from each of the focus group interviews and field notes. Finally, the peer debriefer assisted with spell checks and proper grammar usage while preparing the summaries. Creswell (2009) voiced that using this approach enhances the accuracy of the data captured, because the data interpretation is beyond the researcher and is invested in the interest of another person. After the researcher and peer debriefer discussed the findings and came to a consensus, the researcher was able to proceed with the interpretation of the results. This process assisted the researcher to begin drawing conclusions to aid in answering the research question and qualitative sub questions.

Triangulation

Gall et al. (2007) stated attention and respect is increasing for mixed-methods research in the educational research community. They found that multiple methods of collecting data, known as triangulation, enhance the validity of a study. The researcher used the quantitative data from the 52-items survey and the qualitative data from the PLC observations, audio taped semi-structured focus-groups, interviews, and reviews of documents and artifacts as methods to obtain what Gall et al. (2007) coined, *rich data*. Surveys, interview transcripts, detailed notes, and recorded observations provide full and revealing pictures of real-life examples in a case study.

To triangulate the data, the researcher created a matrix for each of the five critical elements. Each of the critical element matrices contained the second overarching research question, corresponding items from the PLCA-R survey, and a column for each school, A – F. The researcher read through each of the observation summaries, focus group summaries, interview summaries, artifacts, and field notes from the schools several times. After examination of these data, a checkmark was placed in that column of the school when evidence was found for a particular critical element item. If checkmarks were displayed in the majority of the columns for each school for each of the critical elements, then the researcher noted it as such. The researcher then developed a summary of the qualitative findings for each of the six schools.

To help determine the patterns that existed among the high-performing and the low-performing middle schools, the researcher assigned a color code to each of the five critical elements. The colors were assigned as follows: marigold to Shared and

Supportive Leadership, green to Shared Values and Vision, pink to Collective Learning

and Application, orange to Shared Personal Practice, and blue to Supportive Conditions

(relational and structural). As the researcher read through each of these summaries

several times, only the statements or quotes from the summaries pertaining to each of the

five critical elements were color-coded accordingly. Once all six schools' summaries

were color-coded, the researcher then aggregated the data into two groups, high-

performing and low-performing. To determine the patterns that existed amongst and

between the schools, the researcher made notes of commonalities on sticky notes. Then

the researcher labeled each sticky note according to the five critical elements.

Finally, the researcher utilized the color-coded summaries, the sticky notes, the

matrix, and the survey data to assist in developing themes, narratives for the findings, and

justifying the validity of the study.

Summary

This research was approached using a mixed method design. The quantitative data

were gathered adopting the Olivier et al. (2009) survey instrument, *Professional Learning*

Communities Assessment - Revised.   Data were entered into SPSS to perform the

statistical analysis of means and standard deviations from the survey surrounding the five

critical elements of a PLC. Five independent sample *t-tests* were conducted to compare

the high-performing and low-performing middle schools in the implementation of the

five critical elements in a PLC. In addition, the researcher assembled data from the

response rates of the survey. The qualitative data, including interviews, observations, and

reviews of gathered artifacts were captured via audio-tapings and a research notebook.

The researcher used NVivo9 to assist with the organization of the qualitative data. The data transcripts and field notes supported the researcher in an analysis of the real-life implementation of the five critical elements in both groups of schools.

Data captured created a triangulated process and were used for examination in completing the data analysis. This triangulation also included the narratives, outlines, and visuals captured during the site visits. First, the researcher compared the survey analysis of the five critical elements from the high-performing schools (Group 1) against the five critical elements of the low-performing schools (Group 2). Second, the researcher confirmed, disconfirmed, or cross-validated the survey analysis of the five critical elements within each of the high-performing schools and low-performing schools to the interview transcripts and observation notes. Third, the researcher created a matrix, used color codes, and sticky notes to assist in determining the patterns and differences as they surfaced in the interviews summaries, observations summaries, field notes, and reviews of gathered documents including the five critical elements from the two groups (high-performing and low-performing middle schools). Fourth, the researcher compared this analysis to the research literature, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and to the history and experience of the researcher. Finally, the researcher constructed a narrative of the combined data analysis along with the research of this study, to provide a textual representation of information.

The report of the data, the findings, the data analysis, and responses to the research questions are presented in Chapter 4. The analysis of research findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT of DATA and DATA ANALYSIS

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Following are the demographic profiles for each of the six middle schools where the researcher conducted the studies. To protect the rights and ensure anonymity of all participants, each middle school and participants of that school were assigned a letter of the Alphabet (A, B, C, D, E, and F), which were maintained throughout the research. The researcher has included Tables 3 – 26 for each of the schools summarizing the student and teacher demographic data and the observations and interviews data captured during the study.

Demographic Profile Respondent School A

Displayed Quote: We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit. - Aristotle

Located in a small rural area in southeastern Georgia, School A is a school-wide Title I program with a student enrollment of 341 as shown in Table 3. School A had a socio-economic status of 82.15% of students receiving free and reduced lunches. Twenty percent of the student enrollment in School A was Hispanic. The literature for School A was written and distributed both in English and Spanish because of the large enrollment of Hispanic students. The mission statement of School A stated: *To inspire all students to develop to their maximum potential by promoting achievement, self-discipline and cooperation.* The vision statement, *To provide a program of excellence for all students to achieve mastery in each content area,* was posted at the entrance of the school and

throughout the school.

Table 3

Student Demographics of School A

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	63	63	31	157
Males	64	82	38	184
Total	127	145	69	341

As shown in Table 4, 27 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, School A had 34 certificated employees – a principal, a part-time assistant principal, an academic intervention specialist (graduation coach), a media specialist, a part-time counselor, a part-time instructional coach, 28 classroom teachers, and 5 special education (SPED) paraprofessionals. Three of the content teachers worked as extended day employees. Principal A had been at School A for 27 years. Principal A started her career at the same school as a teacher, became the assistant principal, and later assumed responsibilities as the principal. At the time of this study, School A had made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for six consecutive years.

Table 4

Teacher Demographics of School A

	F	M	B	W	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	23	4																	
Ethnic			4	23															
Years in Ed					3	7	4	5	8										
Years at this School										6	8	2	1	10					
Level of Ed															6	16	2	1	2

School A began daily at 7:50 a.m., where all students reported to homeroom. In homeroom, students heard the *word of the day*, repeated The Pledge of Allegiance, and observed a moment of silence. At 7:58 a.m., all students moved to their scheduled classes. School A was on a 4-block schedule of 80 minutes each. After homeroom, sixth-grade students rotated to connections classes, which consisted of extended learning time (ELT) for reading or math, enrichment for English/language arts (ELA), health, physical education, Science Research Association (SRA) Reading (support class), iPass Math (support class via computers), and band; while sixth-grade teachers had planning during the first block. After connections, sixth-grade students then rotated to content classes, which consisted of Math 6, science for regular students, science for gifted students, English/language arts, and social studies.

The seventh-grade students had scheduled content classes, which consisted of

Math 7 or accelerated math, English/language arts 7, or English/language arts or social studies for gifted students. During second block, the seventh-grade students then rotated to connection classes, which too contained enrichment for English/language arts, ELT for reading, health, and physical education, while seventh-grade teachers had planning. The eighth-grade classes rotated to content classes during first through third blocks, which consisted of Math 8 or Algebra I, science, and English/language arts, or accelerated English/language arts and then to connections, while eighth grade teachers had planning during the fourth block. To accommodate the instructional learning of the Hispanic students, School A participated in the *pushed in* model for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and the English Language Learners (ELL). This model allowed the ESOL and ELL students to be included in the general education content classes with peers, along with an ESOL teacher for academic support. At 2:55 p.m., all students returned to homeroom, where the end of day announcements was made and where students were dismissed.

While visiting School A, the researcher had an opportunity to observe the Whole Faculty Study Group (WFSG) PLC for each content area. The researcher was able to observe each PLC group for about 20 minutes. Principal A escorted the researcher to each PLC group location. The researcher was able to observe participants in their respective content areas with the designated lead teacher facilitating each of the PLCs. Table 5 summarizes the PLC groups observed, the number and gender of participants in each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in the PLC. As shown in Table 5, social studies had the least number of participants; yet the researcher observed that this group

conducted the PLC with similar professionalism and urgency as the other groups. The

researcher was able to observe each of the PLC groups as they facilitated discussions of

Chapter 5 of the book study, *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning* by Jan

Chappuis.

Table 5

Observation Table School A

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
Math	11	All Females	Chpt 5 of Book Study
Social Studies	3	2 Females, 1 male	Chpt 5 of Book Study
Science	8	6 Females, 2 males	Chpt 5 of Book Study
ELA	12	11 Females, 1 male	Chpt 5 of Book Study

Note: Facilitated by Content Lead Teachers

While visiting School A, the researcher had an opportunity to interview

certificated faculty and staff from each grade level. Table 6 summarizes the focus group

interviews and the number and gender of participants in each focus group. As shown in

Table 6, the researcher was able to interview participants from each content, connections,

and administrative area.

Table 6

Interview Table School A

Interview Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants
Grade 6	6	All Females
Grade 7	4, one teacher absent	3 Females, 1 Male
Grade 8	5	All Females
Connections	8	5 Females, 3 Males
Media Specialist A	1	Female
Instructional Coach A	1	Female
Assistant Principal A	1	Female
Principal A	1	Female

Finally, according to the SIP, School A identified the following goals for improvement: raise the achievement scores of students in each subgroup, move students from does not meet and meet categories to the next level on the CRCT, and provide a more rigorous, challenging, and differentiated program of study for students who exceeded the standards. To achieve these goals, School A identified the following actions, strategies, and interventions: monitor instruction through awareness walks; establish Whole Faculty Study Group PLCs; conduct book study; incorporate DOK Levels on assessments; encourage teachers to assume leadership roles; examine the 9-week exams and the results of the Teacher Effectiveness Rubric; and accommodate and modify instruction for all students including the economically disadvantaged, SWD, and ELL.

Demographic Profile Respondent School B

Displayed Quote: Work Ethics – Hard work pays off. and Attitude is Everything.
Unknown

Located in east central Georgia, School B had an enrollment of 269 students as shown in Table 7, with a socio-economic status of 100% students receiving free and reduced lunch. The researcher observed pictures of several students displayed on the bulletin board across from the office. These pictures represented the students of the month as selected by teachers.

Table 7

Student Demographics of School B

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	132	1	1	134
Males	133	1	1	135
Total	265	2	2	269

As shown in Table 8, 11 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, School B had 28 certificated employees, including a principal, an instructional leader who also served part-time as the Response To Intervention (RTI) coordinator and inclusion teacher at the elementary level, one media specialist who served part-time as the Gifted Coordinator shared with the high school, a counselor, and 21 classroom teachers. During the site visit, School B was preparing for the upcoming Math Bootcamp. Math Bootcamp was an instructional strategy created to prepare the students for the CRCT and occurred every day, in every class for the week and taught by all of the teachers.

Table 8

Teacher Demographics of School B

	F	M	B	W	Other	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	7	2																		
Ethnic			7	1	1															
Years in Ed						3	0	2	2	2										
Years at this School											4	2	1	1	1					
Level of Ed																2	5	2	0	0

School B was so small that there was only one team of teachers for Grades 6, 7, and 8 each. However, each grade had its own special education (SPED) teacher. All content teachers had to teach social studies because of the small size of the school. At the time of this study, Principal B was starting the fourth year as the head administrator of School B. Previously. Principal B served as the assistant principal and principal of the feeder elementary school. School B had been on the NI list once, but made AYP for four consecutive years and received the Title I Distinguished School award in Georgia for the fourth consecutive year.

The daily routine began at 8:00 every morning with announcements, The Pledge of Allegiance, and mission statement: *To produce lifelong learners who can compete globally in a multi-cultural society,* which was recited daily during the morning announcements by the secretary. On both days of the site visit at School B, the researcher

observed the secretary of School B helping and smiling as she interacted with others. Secretary B reminded students not to take matters in their own hands and to seek a teacher, the counselor, or an administrator. Finally, the secretary ended the announcements with the guidelines for success, saying, "Be safe, be respectful, and be responsible."

The sixth-grade students had connections classes first, while the teachers had 70 minutes of planning. The connection (exploratory) classes included career development, remedial reading and math, and health and physical education. The seventh-grade students had connections classes during the middle of the school day, whereas eighth-grade students had connections classes at the end of the school day. Dismissal in School B was at 3:30 p.m. Before dismissal, all students had an opportunity to purchase items from the snack room, where Principal B assisted with the sale.

While visiting School B, the researcher had an opportunity to observe the Team Meeting PLC. The researcher was able to observe participants in their respective content areas with the designated lead teacher facilitating each of the PLCs. Table 9 summarizes the PLC groups observed, the number and gender of participants in each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in the PLC. As Table 9 indicates, the team leaders facilitated the team meetings and their main topic was their upcoming Bootcamp in preparation for the CRCT.

Table 9

Observation Table School B

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
Grade 6	3, 1 absent	All Females	SWD and Bootcamp
Grade 7	4	All Females	SWD and Bootcamp
Grade 8	Did Not Observe	Team Leader Absent	
Exploratory	4	2 Females, 2 Males	Bootcamp

Note: Facilitated by Team Leaders

While visiting School B, the researcher had an opportunity to interview certificated faculty and staff. Table 10 summarizes the focus group interviews and the number and gender of participants in each focus group. As Table 10 indicates, all grade levels and exploratory teachers were interviewed, as well as the media specialist, instructional leader, and Principal B.

Table 10

Interview Table School B

Interview Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants
Grade 6	3, 1 absent	All Females
Grade 7	4	All Females
Grade 8	4	3 Females, 1 Male
Exploratory	3, 1 absent	2 Females, 2 Males
Media Specialist B	1	Female
Instructional Leader B	1	Female
Principal B	1	Male

Finally, according to the SIP, School B identified the following goals for improvement: increase student achievement in the content areas, increase attendance rate, increase the academic achievement of SWD, increase instructional strategies and practices, and increase parental involvement. To achieve these goals, School B identified

the following actions, strategies, and interventions: write across the curriculum; utilize the Georgia Online Assessment System (OAS); incorporate professional development sessions to improve teachers' instructional practices; meet twice a week to plan lessons; provide enrichment throughout the school day; conduct after school tutorial; create a Word Wall for students to increase the mastery of vocabulary words; increase enrichment for SWD; and incorporate more manipulative materials within the classroom.

Demographic Profile Respondent School C

Displayed at entrance of building: Great Staff, Great Students, and Great Parents.

School C was the largest of all of the six middle schools with four feeder elementary schools from within the district. When School C was in NI status, the school became state-directed. Principal C became the state-appointed administrator. At the time of the study, School C had made AYP for three consecutive years (2008, 2009, and 2010). Consequently, School C was recognized and named a Georgia Title I Distinguished School. Principal C had worked as a teacher and as an assistant principal at School C before she became the head administrator.

The mission statement - *To provide a positive learning environment to empower each student to achieve his/her highest potential,* was posted at the entrance of the building and throughout the building. On every visit, the researcher heard the cafeteria referred to as the "dining hall," the auditorium as the "theater," and the media center as the "discovery center." As the researcher visited throughout the school, these locations were labeled as such. In addition, whenever a phone call was made to the school, the receptionist's response was, "It's a wonderful day to be at School C!"

With a student enrollment of 1,138 as shown in Table 11 and a socioeconomic status of 67%, based on the number of students eligible to receive free and reduced lunches, School C was located in a large urban city in east central Georgia.

Table 11

Student Demographics of School C

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	369	157	33	559
Males	374	163	42	579
Total	743	320	75	1138

As shown in Table 12, 64 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, School C employed 114 certificated faculty and staff members – a principal, 2 full-time assistant principals, one for sixth grade and one for seventh grade, an assistant principal who served as both the eighth-grade administrator and the math instructional coach, 102 teachers, 3 counselors - one for each grade, a media specialist, and 3 full-time instructional coaches (ELA, math and science). This large middle school had three teams of content teachers on each grade level to accommodate the instructional learning of the students.

Table 12

Teacher Demographics of School C

	F	M	B	W	Other	0–5	6-10	11-15	16–20	20+	0–5	6-10	11-15	16–20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	42	13																		
Ethnic			23	30	1															
Years in Ed						8	10	14	10	13										
Years at this School											15	21	18	0	1					
Level of Ed																16	18	18	2	1

School C began daily at 8:15 a.m. and dismissed at 3:15 p.m. After students
arrived and went to homerooms, five minutes each morning were set aside for students to
go to the lockers, to participate in The Pledge of Allegiance, and to observe a moment of
silence. School C had a 6-period day with classes lasting for 50 minutes. The sixth-grade
students had extended learning time (ELT) during 4th period, seventh-grade students had
ELT during 6th period, and eighth-grade students had an ELT during 5th period. The
scheduling of ELT was based on data from assessments, the progress monitoring of
students, and the SIP. Connection classes in School C consisted of band for beginners,
intermediate, and advanced students, health and physical education, chorus, the
Technology Lab, and Success Maker, a computer lab used for students who needed
additional assistance with math and reading. Sometimes the receptionist made very short

announcements in the morning. However, most of the announcements were made in the

afternoon at 3:10 p.m. before dismissal.

While visiting School C, the researcher had an opportunity to observe the

Collaborative Learning (CL) PLC. Table 13 summarizes the PLC groups observed, the

number and gender of participants in each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in

the PLC. As Table 13 table indicates, the numbers of participant groups were large;

however, they all had the same professional learning agenda, which was on Module 4 of

the new teacher evaluation system, the CLassroom Analysis of State Standards (CLASS)

Keys.

Table 13

Observation Table School C

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
Grade 6	32	28 Females, 4 Males	CLASS Keys – Mod 4
Grade 7	26	21 Females, 5 Males	CLASS Keys – Mod 4
Grade 8	25	20 Females, 5 Males	CLASS Keys – Mod 4
Exploratory	6	3 Females, 3 Males	CLASS Keys – Mod 4

Note: Facilitated by Assistant Principals C1 and C2

While visiting School C, the researcher had an opportunity to interview

certificated faculty and staff. Table 14 summarizes the focus group interviews and the

number and gender of participants in each focus group. As Table 14 indicates, the

researcher was able to interview a sample of participants from each grade level along

with the principal, media specialist, counselors, instructional leaders, and one of the three

assistant principals. The Collaborative Learning PLCs were held on Tuesdays in Staff

Development Room # 17. Each Tuesday, during grade-level planning time, teachers and

Demographic Profile Respondent School D

   Displayed Quote: A teacher is a special friend whose love and kindness never ends.

   School D was the second largest of the six middle schools for student enrollment. As shown in Table 15, there were a total of 645 students with 79.61% of the students receiving free and reduced lunches.

Table 15

Student Demographics of School D

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	134	148	18	300
Males	182	146	17	345
Total	316	294	35	645

   As shown in Table 16, 16 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, School D had 53 certificated staff employees and was located in a rural mid-sized town in east central Georgia.

Table 16

Teacher Demographics of School D

	F	M	B	W	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	13	0																	
Ethnic			10	3															
Years in Ed					2	3	3	3	2										
Years at this School										2	3	6	1	1					
Level of Ed															0	4	8	0	0

School D was in its third year of not making AYP and was in a status of NI -2.

School D had once received recognition as a Georgia School of Excellence and had been

recognized as a Georgia Title I School of Distinction before the school was categorized as

a NI-2 status school. At the time of this study, School D had met the AYP criteria for test

participation, but had not met the AYP criteria for academic performance in math for

students with disabilities (SWD) or the attendance criteria for White students and SWDs.

Decision makers in school D had to offer both public school choice and supplemental

services to their students because of its NI status.

School D was under the leadership of two new administrators, a principal and an

assistant principal. Principal D was appointed to the position about two weeks before the

beginning of the school year. Principal D was a former teacher and an assistant principal

at this same school before this appointment as principal. Assistant Principal D, who had

also been one of the instructional coaches at the feeder high school, was appointed to the position during the summer before the start of the new school year. School D also had a second assistant principal that not only assisted in administrative duties, but also served as the administrator for 8.5 students, the students who had not met the academic requirements for ELA and math, or failed the CRCT for ELA or math during the previous academic year. During the school day, the 8.5 students remained at School D in the morning to obtain mastery of ELA and math skills. During the afternoon, students completed the remaining schedule of science, social studies, and electives at their feeding high school.

Students in School D arrived between 7:30 a.m. until 7:55 a.m. During this time, some of the SPED students participated in Academy of Reading or worked at computer stations until it was time for The Pledge of Allegiance, a moment of silence, and the morning announcements. After this daily routine, school-wide Extended Learning Time (ELT) followed. The schedule contained five blocks a day, which lasted for 90 minutes. ELT was conducted during the first block, which took place for 30 minutes to provide students an opportunity to strengthen their skills in ELA and math. Connection classes included Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), band, keyboarding, health and physical education, technology, study skills, Outlook (gifted students), and an enrichment class for career connections.

Each grade in School D was made up of two and one-half teams. Each full team consisted of two ELA teachers, two math teachers, and a science and social studies teacher. The half teams were made up of teachers for math and reading only. Teachers

who taught science and social studies had an A/B schedule, where science was taught one day and then social studies the next day. The sixth-grade teachers taught content during second, fourth, and fifth block, and had planning during third block while students attended connections. The seventh-grade teachers taught content during second, third, and fifth block, and had planning during the fourth block, while students attended connections. The eighth-grade teachers taught content during second and fourth block, and had planning during fifth block while students attended connections. Sometimes announcements were made before dismissal of the day, which ended at 3:05 p.m.

While visiting School D, the researcher had an opportunity to observe the Professional Learning Team (PLT) PLC for each grade and connections. The researcher was able to observe all of the participants in the respective grade levels with the instructional leader facilitating each of the PLCs. Table 17 summarizes the PLC groups observed, the number and gender of participants in each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in the PLC. As shown in Table 17, the researcher observed the PLC groups studying the same CLASS Keys standard, Standards-Based Instruction (SBI) 1.1.

Table 17

Observation Table School D

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
Grade 6	10	9 Females, 1Male	CLASS Keys – SBI1.1
Grade 7	14	13 Females, 1 Male	CLASS Keys – SBI1.1
Grade 8	13	10 Females, 3 Males	CLASS Keys – SBI1.1
Connections	7	5 Females, 2 Males	CLASS Keys – SBI1.1

Note: Facilitated by Instructional Coach

While visiting School D, the researcher had an opportunity to interview certificated faculty and staff. Table 18 summarizes the focus group interviews and the number and gender of participants in each focus group. As shown in Table 18, the researcher interviewed participants from all of the grade levels, the connections team, the media specialist, the academic coach/instructional leader, one of the APs, and Principal D. While visiting School D, Room 305 was the setting where the professional learning meetings took place. This room was where the instructional coach resided, where teachers and students came for assistance, and where student performance data were posted.

Table 18

Interview Table School D

Interview Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants
Grade 6	10	All Females
Grade 7	13	12 Females, 1 Male
Grade 8	12	9 Females, 3 Males
Connections	6	5Females, 1 Male
Media Specialist D	1	Female
Instructional Leader D	1	Female
Assistant Principal D	1	Female
Principal D	1	Female

Finally, according to the SIP, School D identified the following goals for

improvement: increase achievement in math and language arts and decrease student

absenteeism rate over 15 days. To achieve these goals, School D identified the following

actions, strategies, and interventions: meet (content teachers) weekly to engage in

collaborative planning; meet monthly to study vertical/horizontal the scope of instruction;

conduct awareness walks; align the learning activities to the GPS framework; include

Accelerated Math, analyze common assessments collaboratively; train on CLASS Keys;

provide (instructional coach) support and facilitate PLCs; and give teachers incentive and

recognition for accomplishments.

Demographic Profile Respondent School E

Displayed Quote: He who learns but does not think, is lost! He who thinks but does not

learn is in great danger. - Confucius

Located in a very small rural town in east central Georgia is School E, which had

not made AYP for eight consecutive years; therefore, School E was in a status of NI-7.

School E had to offer both public school district choice and supplemental services

(tutoring). At the time of this study, School E was in a state-directed status, had made AYP the previous academic year, and needed to make AYP for the second time consecutively to be removed from the NI list. School E had a student enrollment of 260 as shown in Table 19, with 100% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Table 19

Student Demographics of School E

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	-	-	-	131
Males	-	-	-	129
Total	130	126	4	260

Note: Dash indicates that data were not obtained

At the time of this study, School E was under the leadership of a new principal for the first time in many years. Prior to Principal E's first year at School E, she was an assistant principal at the high school level and a principal at the elementary level. As shown in Table 20, 8 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, School E had 26 certificated staff members, who included a principal, an assistant principal, a counselor, and a media specialist, an instructional coach, a student success coordinator, a school improvement specialist, and connections teachers who were all shared with the high school. In addition, there was a teacher who taught the students identified as gifted and was shared with the feeder elementary school.

Table 20

Teacher Demographics of School E

	F	M	B	W	0–5	6-10	11-15	16–20	20+	0–5	6-10	11-15	16–20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	6	2																	
Ethnic			2	6															
Years in Ed					2	0	2	2	2										
Years at this School										4	1	1	2	0					
Level of Ed															3	2	2	0	0

Teachers of School E had to be at school by 7:30 a.m. Students began arriving between 7:30 to 7:50 a.m. Afterwards students obtained breakfast from the lunchroom; they then transitioned to their homeroom (also the first period) to eat breakfast. At 7:55 a.m., for about five minutes, School E officially started with the morning announcements, The Pledge of Allegiance, a moment of silence, the singing of the alma mater, and a recitation of the mission statement. With a 7-period day, the planning periods for seventh and eighth grades consisted of 50 minutes each. The sixth-grade teachers' planning period occurred during the third period of the day beginning at 10:38 a.m., seventh-grade during the fourth period beginning at 11:32 a.m., and eighth-grade during the fifth period of the day beginning at 1:00 p.m.

The duration of the science and social studies classes lasted for 50 minutes, whereas all ELA and math classes lasted for 100 minutes. Thus, this timeframe required

two teams of teachers for ELA and math in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. In the sixth grade, two teachers shared the responsibility of instruction for science and social studies, whereas, two teachers shared the responsibility for social studies in both sixth, seventh, and eighth. Connection classes consisted of band, health, physical education, keyboarding, art, media, and agriculture. The gifted classes for were held every Friday during first period for sixth-grade students, every Tuesday during second period for seventh-grade students, and every Thursday during third period for eighth-grade students. Finally, for the last 15 minutes of the school day, prior to dismissal, the entire school was engaged in silent reading.

While visiting School E, the researcher had an opportunity to observe the Grade Level PLC. Table 21 summarizes the PLC groups observed, the number and gender of participants in each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in the PLC. As shown in Table 21, the researcher had an opportunity to observe all of the grade level PLCs. The researcher was not able to observe connection teachers, because their planning schedules were shared with the joining high school. For the grades that were observed, the grade-level's PLC topic was the same each time, CLASS Keys Module, Assessment of Student Learning (AL1.3).

Table 21

Observation Table School E

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
Grade 6	4	All Females	CLASS Keys – AL1.3
Grade 7	5	3 Females, 2 Males	CLASS Keys – AL1.3
Grade 8	7	6 Females, 1 Male	CLASS Keys – AL1.3
Connections	Did Not Observe	Teachers shared with HS	

Note: Facilitated by Instructional Coach

While visiting School E, the researcher had an opportunity to interview certificated faculty and staff. Table 22 summarizes the focus group interviews and the number and gender of participants in each focus group. As Table 22 indicates, the researcher had an opportunity to interview all the grade level groups. Again, the researcher was not able to interview the Connections group due to a scheduling conflict of them being shared with their High School. Table 22 also indicates that the researcher was able to interview administrators, the AP, and the Principal (over the phone).

Table 22

Interview Table School E

Interview Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants
Grade 6	4	All Females
Grade 7	6	4 Females, 2 Males
Grade 8	4, 1 absent	4 Females
Connections	Did Not Interview	Teachers shared with HS
Assistant Principal E	1	Female
Principal E (phone)	1	Female

Finally, School E's SIP was not accessible.

Demographic Profile Respondent School F

Displayed Quote: I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. – M. L. King, Jr.

Located in the southeastern part of Georgia was a small rural school, known as School F. This school had an enrollment of 581 students as shown in Table 23. Like Schools B and E, School F had a 100% of students receiving free breakfast and lunch. Formally recognized twice as a Georgia Title I Distinguished School, the mission statement displayed in the office read: "*To form a partnership among students, parents, and faculty – together we set high standards, provide quality instruction, and achieve excellence in learning.*" School F had not made AYP in the SWD subgroup for six consecutive years.

Table 23

Student Demographics of School F

Gender	Black	White	Other	Total
Females	155	126	7	288
Males	151	136	6	293
Total	306	262	13	581

At the time of the study, Principal F had been the lead administrator for four years and was facing many challenges. There had been reduction in force (RIF), a high teacher attrition rate, a decrease in school population, and scheduling changes, which also caused

a decrease in teacher planning time because of the economic constraints. As shown in Table 24, 18 certificated personnel responded to the survey. However, the faculty and staff at School F consisted of Principal F, two assistant principals (AP 1 and AP 2), 34 teachers, a counselor, a media specialist, a graduation coach, 7 full-time paraprofessionals, and a part-time paraprofessional. AP1 also served as the instructional coach for School F.

Table 24

Teacher Demographics of School F

	F	M	B	W	0 – 5	6-10	11-15	16 – 20	20+	0 – 5	6-10	11-15	16 – 20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	16	1																	
Ethnic			2	15															
Years in Ed					2	4	2	2	7										
Years at this School										3	8	2	1	3					
Level of Ed															2	8	7	0	2

The official school day at School F began at 7:55 a.m. and ended at 3:15 p.m. Students began arriving at 7:40 a.m. and had the opportunity to eat breakfast, go to the library, or to take care of errands prior to reporting to first period classes. At the start of every school day, students in School F repeated The Pledge of Allegiance, had a moment of silence, listened to morning announcements (made by the administrators, usually by

the principal), and listened to a character education mini-lesson taught by the counselor.

Each grade level contained two teams of content teachers and a team of exploratory teachers for band, health, physical education, and keyboarding. Each class lasted for 50 minutes. Due to budget cuts, teachers had a planning period of 45 minutes, which previously included 110 minutes. The eighth-grade teams had planning during first and second block; however, not common planning. Seventh-grade teachers had the planning during the third and fourth blocks without common planning and sixth-grade teachers had planning during the sixth and seventh blocks, but teachers had no common planning. Exploratory teachers had an extended planning during the fifth block. At this time they had lunch and assisted the administrators with lunch duty for the different grade levels.

Like School D, School F had 8.5 students. These students had not met the academic requirements for ELA and math, or failed the CRCT for ELA or math during the previous academic year. However, 8.5 students were able to receive high school credits for history, physical science, and one exploratory class. The exploratory class was a technology class taught daily during the first block by a high school teacher at the feeder school.

During the second 9-week period of school, School F provided after-school tutoring in math and reading twice a week for students who needed further help. In addition, School F had a Mobile Technology Lab (technology bus) that traveled throughout the community every Tuesday to provide students access to computers for completing assignments or for playing math games. With the proper preapproved

identification, parents also could have access to Parent Connect, a system for reviewing

the records of their children in the school system.

While visiting School F, the researcher had an opportunity to observe one Content

Level PLC. The researcher was able to observe the team leader facilitating the PLC.

Table 25 summarizes the PLC group observed, the number and gender of participants in

each PLC group, and the topic being discussed in the PLC. As Table 25 indicates, the

researcher was only able to observe one PLC during the site visit. This site visit was

originally scheduled for another date, but Principal F requested the date to be moved

later. A few teachers were absent and many teachers showed their "early pass" to leave

because of the significance of the day (*Valentine's Day)*. However, the PLC that the

researcher was able to observe involved the teachers collaborating for their next unit of

instruction in science.

Table 25

Observation Table School F

PLC Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants	PLC Topic
ELA	Did Not Observe		
Math	Did Not Observe		
Science	3	All Females	Science Lesson Plans
Social Studies	Did Not Observe		

Note: Facilitated by Team Leader

While visiting School F, the researcher had an opportunity to interview

certificated faculty and staff. Table 26 summarizes the focus group interviews and the

number and gender of participants in each focus group. As Table 26 indicates, the

researcher was able to interview both teams for each grade level. However, the

exploratory teachers were not available for interviewing at the time of the site visit. In addition, the researcher was able to interview one of the APs and Principal F.

Table 26

Interview Table School F

Interview Group	# of Participants	Gender of Participants
Grade 6	2 (parent conference)	All Females
Grade 6	6	5 Females, 1 Male
Grade 7	5	All Females
Grade 7	5	4 Females, 1 Male
Grade 8	7	6 Females, 1 Male
Grade 8	3, 1 absent	All Females
Exploratory	Did Not Interview	Scheduling Conflict
Assistant Principal F	1	Female
Principal F	1	Male

Finally, according to the SIP, School F identified the following goals for improvement: improve student achievement across all content areas; improve student achievement across all subgroups; increase student engagement; improve student discipline; improve the effectiveness of resource management; maintain a motivated, professional, and competent staff; and decrease the CRCT achievement gap between black/white and other student subgroups in math and reading. To achieve these goals, School F identified the following actions, strategies, and interventions: conduct bi-annual benchmark testing; analyze data to adjust instruction monitor instruction (administrators and instructional coach); utilize the mobile computer lab, establish a mentor program ensure collaboration across all grade levels; encourage parents to use Parent Connect; provide Focus on Five CRCT sessions for at-risk students; and replace outdated computers.

Summary of Participant Demographics as Captured by Surveys

Table 27 summarizes the principal demographics as captured from the surveys and site visits during the study. Table 27 shows the school administrators included four female principals and two male principals; four Black administrators and two White administrators with a range of 6 to 20 years of experience in education. As shown in Table 27, Principal F had the fewest number of years in education, whereas Principal A had the highest number of years in education and years at her school.

Table 27

Principal Demographics by School

	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Education	Years At this School	Level of Education
Principal A	F	B	20+	20+	Ed.D
Principal B	M	B	16-20	6-10	Ed.S
Principal C	F	B	16-20	6-10	Ed.D
Principal D	F	W	16-20	16-20	Ed.S
Principal E	F	B	16-20	0-5	Ed.D
Principal F	M	W	6-10	6-10	Ed.S

While administering the survey, the researcher was able to acquire other demographic data, obtained from scantron Items 53-58. Table 28 summarizes the overall demographic data from the participants of School A – F.

Table 28

Overall Demographics from Returned Surveys

	F	M	B	W	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	0 – 5	6 -10	11- 15	16 – 20	20+	BS	MS	Ed.S	Ed.D	Other
Gender	109	22																	
Ethnic			48	78															
Years in Ed					20	24	27	24	27										
Years at this School										34	43	30	6	16					
Level of Ed															27	53	39	3	5

Survey Response Rate

Table 29 has been included to summarize the overall response rate of the surveys. Initially, the researcher was concerned about the unexpected overall response rate, which was less than the expected 80%, as well as the margin of differences of response returns from the high- and low-performing schools. Yet, because of the good internal consistency of the survey responses across the schools, that concern diminished.

Table 29

Overall Response Rate by School

	# of Surveys Distributed	*# of Surveys Returned*	*Percentage Rate*
School A	32	28	87.5%
School B	21	11	52.0%
School C	105	64	61.0%
School D	53	16	30.0%
School E	26	8	31.%
School F	39	18	51.0%
Total	276	145	52.5%

Table 30 summarizes the overall types of participants who responded to the survey. As Table 30 indicates, teachers represented the highest number of respondents, (108) respondents completing the survey from the six middle schools. The administrators had the second highest respondent rate. It should be noted that the "other" type of respondents included the graduation and instructional coaches. As shown in Table 30, Schools A and F were the only schools in which all participant types in the targeted population responded.

Table 30

Survey Response Rate of Participants

Title of Respondents	# of Actual Respondents from each School						
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**Total**
Administrator	1	2	3	1	0	1	**8**
Media Specialist	2	0	0	0	0	1	**3**
Teacher	22	7	51	10	6	12	**108**
Counselor	1	0	1	0	0	2	**4**
Other	1	0	0	0	1	1	**3**
No Identification	1	2	9	5	1	1	**19**
Total Surveys Returned	28	11	64	16	8	18	**145**

Reliability Statistics

After running the frequency command for the descriptive statistics of the 52 items for all participants (N = 145), the researcher ran the reliability analysis command in SPSS to measure the internal consistency of the survey responses. The test of reliability coefficient returned a one-time factor of .98. The reliability findings of the PLCA-R for each of the critical elements with a subscale (N = 145) revealed the following factor coefficients: Shared and Supportive Leadership of .94; Shared Values and Vision of .93; Collective Learning and Application of .93; Shared Personal Practice of .90; Supportive Conditions – Relationships of .88 and Structural of .93. Cronk (2008) stated numbers close to 1.00 represent a very good internal consistency, thus, making the PLCA-R survey a reliable instrument for this study concerning the examination of the implementation of critical elements in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

Findings

Quantitative Phase

Overarching Research Question 1: *Are there significant differences in the implementation of the critical elements of professional learning communities between high-performing and low-performing middle schools*?

Tables 31-35 have been created to present the summary of the schools' perception ratings of each of the five critical elements: Shared and Supportive Leadership, Shared Values and Vision, Collective Learning and Application, Shared Personal Practice, and Supportive Conditions (relational and structural). Immediately following each of the five *t*-test summaries, the researcher has included the response to the corresponding research sub-question.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

As shown in Table 31, an independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the low-performing middle schools to the high-performing middle schools for critical element Shared and Supportive Leadership. No significant difference was found (t (143) = -1.14, p> .05). The mean of LP middle schools (m = 3.04, sd = .42) was not significantly different from the mean of HP middle schools (m = 2.91, sd = .72).

Table 31

T-Test Results: Shared and Supportive Leadership

Performance	*n*	M	SD	T
High-performing	103	2.91	.72	-1.14
Low-performing	42	3.04	.42	-1.41

Sub-question 1: Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Based on the results of the *t*-test comparing the perceptions of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C) to the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F), there were no significant differences for the implementation of the critical element Shared and Supportive Leadership.

Shared Values and Vision

As shown in Table 32, an independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the low-performing middle schools to the high-performing middle schools for critical element Shared Values and Vision. No significant difference was found (t (143) = 1.79, p> .05). The mean of low performing middle schools (m = 2.87, sd = .47) was not significantly different from the mean of high performing middle schools (m = 3.06, sd = .64).

Table 32

T-Test Results: Shared Values and Vision

Performance	*n*	M	SD	T
High-performing	103	3.06	.64	1.79
Low-performing	42	2.87	.47	2.03

Sub-question 2: Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared values and vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing

middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Based on the results of the t-test comparing the perceptions of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C) to the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F), there were no significant differences for the implementation of the critical element Shared Values and Vision.

Collective Learning and Application

As shown in Table 33, an independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the low-performing middle schools to the high-performing middle schools for critical element Collective Learning and Application. No significant difference was found between the means of the two groups (t (143) = 2.48, p > .05). The mean of low performing middle schools (m = 2.92, sd = .47) was not significantly different than the mean of high performing middle schools (m = 3.17, sd = .58).

Table 33

T-Test Results: Collective Learning and Application

Performance	n	M	SD	T
High-performing	103	3.17	.58	2.48
Low-performing	42	2.92	.47	2.72

Sub-question 3: Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Based on the results of the *t*-test comparing the perceptions of the high-

performing middle schools (A, B, and C) to the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F), there were no significant differences for the implementation of the critical element, Collective Learning and Application.

Shared Personal Practices

As shown in Table 34, an independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the low-performing middle schools to the high-performing middle schools for critical element Shared Personal Practices. No significant difference was found between the means of the two groups (t (143) = 4.23, p < .01). The mean of low performing middle schools (m = 2.56, sd = .63) was not significantly different than the mean of high performing middle schools (m = 3.04, sd = .60).

Table 34

T-Test Results: Shared Personal Practice

Performance	*n*	M	SD	T
High-performing	103	3.04	.60	4.23
Low-performing	42	2.56	.63	4.13

Sub-question 4: Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Even though the *t*-value for Shared Personal Practice is greater than the researcher's established critical *t*-value of 2.601, it was accepted as a probability of chance of difference and not as a significant difference. Therefore, based on the results of

the t-test comparing the perceptions of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C) to the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F), there were no significant differences for the implementation of the critical element, Shared Personal Practices.

Supportive Conditions

As shown in Table 35, an independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the low-performing middle schools to the high-performing middle schools for critical element Supportive Conditions. No significant difference was found (t (143) = 1.28, p > .05). The mean of LP middle schools (m = 2.78, sd = .65) was not significantly different from the mean of HP middle schools (m = 2.93, sd = .66).

Table 35

T-Test Results: Supportive Conditions

Performance	n	M	SD	T
High-performing	103	2.93	.66	1.28
Low-performing	42	2.78	.65	1.30

Sub-question 5: Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

Based on the results of the t-test comparing the perceptions of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C) to the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F), there were no significant differences for the implementation of the critical element, Supportive Conditions.

Survey Findings Analysis

To compare the means of the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F) to the means of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C), the researcher conducted five independent-samples t-tests. According to the results of the t-tests, no significant differences were found for the PLC implementation of the five critical elements Shared and Supportive Leadership; Shared Beliefs, Values and Vision; Collective Learning and Application; Shared Personal Practice; and Supportive Conditions between high-performing middle schools and low-performing middle schools. These results assisted the researcher in answering the first overarching research question.

Overarching Research Question 1: Are there significant differences in the implementation of the critical elements of professional learning communities between high-performing and low-performing middle schools? Based on the results from the surveys and analysis of the quantitative research, the researcher did not find any significant differences in the implementation of the critical elements between the high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

Qualitative Phase

Overarching Research Question 2: *If differences do exist, are there patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools?*

From the recorded focus-group interviews, the observed PLCs, and reviewed documents and artifacts, the researcher has included the results for the high-performing and low-performing schools as they pertain to the implementation of each of the five critical elements. The *PLCA-R 52 items* from the survey used in the quantitative phase

were also used to assist in reporting the practices of the five critical elements that occurred in the six schools.

Themes

The researcher aggregated the data into two groups, high-performing and low-performing, to help determine the patterns that existed amongst and between the schools. These patterns were grouped by similarities to create nine major themes. Seven of the themes correlated to the 52 items on the *PLCA-R* survey and to the 5 critical elements as outlined in the literature. The eighth and ninth themes, *Various Types of Assessments* and *Leadership Accountability*, emerged as items unrelated to the survey. Thus, the researcher constructed the following themes that represented the patterns among and between the two groups of schools: Leadership Accountability, Leadership Support, Various Modes of Communications, Various Types of Professional Development, Various Types of Assessments, Access to Multiple Sources of Data, Access to Multiple Resources (Human and Technological), Protocols and Norms, and Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities.

Table 36 describes the patterns that led to the creation of the nine themes. Table 37 summarizes the relationship of the themes in this study to the definition of the critical elements as referenced in the literature and outlined on the *PLCA-R* survey instrument. As indicated in Table 36, two of the themes did not directly relate to any of the critical elements as defined in this study or found on the *PLCA-R* survey instrument.

Table 36

Themes and Description of Coded Patterns

Major Themes	Coded Patterns
Access to Multiple Resources (Human and Technological)	RESA, Instructional Leader, local college, media specialist, district support, GLRS
Access to Multiple Sources of Data and Various Types of Assessments	Data room, computer, CRCT, benchmarks, formative, summative, quizzes, pre-tests
Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities	Providing and receiving feedback, allowing teachers to share in decision-making, allowing teachers to make suggestions and provide input
Leadership Accountability	Administrators monitoring instructional practices, data, assessments, providing timely feedback
Leadership Support	Attending and participating in PLCs, Team meetings, leadership meetings, nurturing teachers
Protocols and Norms	Common assessments, lesson plan template, agenda template, meeting minutes template, common planning, regular collaborative sessions, consistency
Various Modes of Communications	Email, face-to-face, over the phone
Various Types of Professional Development	Book study, Class Keys, Depth of Knowledge (DOK), Assessment Strategies, differentiated instruction

Table 37

Themes Related to PLC Critical Elements and PLCA-R Survey Items

Related PLC Critical Element	Related PLCA-R Survey Item #	Themes
Collective Learning and Application Supportive Conditions	21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 45, 46, 47	*Access to Multiple Resources (Human and Technological)*
Shared and Supportive Leadership Collective Learning and Application Shared Personal Practices	3, 11, 20, 29, 30, 34, 37	*Access to Multiple Sources of Data*
Shared and Supportive Leadership Shared Values and Vision Shared Personal Practices Supportive Conditions	2, 5, 7, 31, 32, 35, 38, 39, 41	*Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities*
Shared and Supportive Leadership	4, 6, 8, 10	*Leadership Support*
Shared Values and Vision Collective Learning and Application Shared Personal Practices Supportive Conditions	13, 14, 15, 18, 23, 24, 36, 40, 43, 44, 49	*Protocols and Norms Various Types of Professional Development*
Shared and Supportive Leadership Shared Values and Vision Collective Learning and Application Shared Personal Practices Supportive Conditions	1, 9, 12, 16, 24, 25, 33, 50, 51	*Various Modes of Communication*
Supportive Conditions		*Various Types of Assessments*
Shared and Supportive Leadership		*Leadership Accountability*

Each of the five critical elements with its corresponding description is being

reported along with the findings. Within each critical element, the findings are being

reported by high-performing and low-performing schools. The themes within each of the

five critical elements are indicated as italicized sub-headings at the beginning of the

paragraph, with supportive findings.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

Description: School administrators participating democratically with teachers, sharing power, authority, and decision-making by promoting and nurturing leadership among staff (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

High-Performing Schools

Leadership Support. All three high-performing schools had a leadership team in place, where teacher leaders were selected by their principals to participate. However, based on the data, only two of the schools had fully implemented a democratic process where teachers were allowed to share the power and make decisions.

The assistant principal of School A said if teachers expressed a desire to excel as leaders or see the school improve, then they became a part of the Design Leadership Team. She further stated, when a vacancy occurred, teachers could apply for the leadership role or be selected by the principal. In School B, grade-level chairs were selected by the principal to be a part of the Leadership Team, but teachers voiced how decisions were always top-down. In School C, the Administrative Team (AT) interviewed and selected teachers to participate in a leadership role when they demonstrated leadership abilities. During the time of this study, the grade-level team leaders were serving as facilitators on a monthly rotation. Teachers stated how this allowed them to serve in a leadership capacity.

Leadership Accountability. This new attribute of nurturing leadership was demonstrated by the administrators of Schools A and C when they consistently modeled and communicated the expectation of follow-up from the PLCs.

School A's Focus Team, comprised of the principal, assistant principal, media specialist, instructional leader, graduation coach, and counselor, developed the focus of study for the Whole Faculty Study Group (WFSG) PLCs. Teachers were expected to have already read the pre-reading assignment, come prepared to share and answer the essential questions based on the reading, provide closure, and prepare a summarization. These summaries were then submitted to the instructional leader for the Focus Team's review and feedback. Principal A said that the Focus Team guided and monitored the work of teachers in the WFSG meetings to make sure that the assignments were on track. The Focus Team regularly conducted awareness walks to observe teaching and learning as follow-up from the PLCs. Teachers said that the administrators of School A attended designated PLC meetings, met with them to discuss students' progress reports, report cards, the teacher effectiveness rubric, and provide feedback. School B's academic coach said she observed teachers daily, but may not have observed all teachers on a particular day. Teachers voiced that the principal was not visible during instructional time; however, they felt very supported when the academic coach or principal did come during instruction. Teachers of School C said that the administrators not only talked the talk, they walked the walk. They were able to speak the language of the standards; they knew what the frameworks were, what they should like in a standards-based classroom, and were in and out of the room on a daily basis.

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. Only two of the schools provided several examples of having opportunities to give input; one teacher of one school provided an example of taking a risk and one school's participants expressed how

a culture of trust was promoted. However, from the data collected, all schools did not fully implement a culture of trust, risk-taking, and opportunities for all personnel to provide input.

Administrators of School A used their SIP to make decisions for the school. They also had participated in a survey to determine professional learning. Sometimes teachers within the PLC groups chose the topics or the book to study for professional learning. Teachers were also expected to have rotational assignments when leading the PLCs. Teachers of School A had been given the opportunity to provide input for the building of the new school, submit changes for the student handbook, and provide input for school policies. According to the principal and teachers, this provided all teachers the opportunities to be leaders and empowered to make decisions. Teachers said that Principal A encouraged them to trust, rely, and support each other, and encouraged students to develop relationships with teachers. Principal A stated, "I trust them to do what they are supposed to do."

Principal B stated, "I empower teachers to make decisions and I am the backseat bus driver." However, several of the teachers from School B stated they had not been given many opportunities to make decisions on behalf of the school. Most of the information and decisions that came from the leadership team was top-down and were about changes that needed to be made or concerns that had arisen. Yet, the researcher heard of one example of risk-taking and one example of input. One risk-taking example came from a teacher explaining how she made the decision to seek the high school teacher to plan and assist students that were having difficulties in math. The academic

coach gave an example of providing input when she created a writer's camp to prepare the 8th grade students for the writing assessment. The academic coach said that she also felt empowered when she had to play the role of administrator when Principal B was out. Principal C said that the leadership team utilized the School Improvement Plan (SIP), the data from benchmarks, and the data from the extended learning time (ELT) to make decisions for the school. In School C, teachers voiced that they were being empowered and information was being shared. Teachers of School C said they had been given the opportunity to participate in making some decisions on behalf of the school; such as the adoption of textbooks, changes to the school agenda, and once interrupting a normal school day to allow a film crew to come and assist with a student-written film project.

Low-Performing Schools

Leadership Support. All three low-performing schools had a leadership team in place, where two of the schools were being led by new administrators. One of the new administrators did not know the selection criteria for teachers being a part of the leadership team; whereas the other new administrator, along with the veteran administrator selected their teacher leaders.

School D's Leadership Team, was comprised of the principal, the assistant principals, the academic coach, the counselor, the media specialist, the athletic director, and the grade coordinators. Representatives on this managerial/operational team were selected every year by administration. School E's Design Team was comprised of the principal, the assistant principals, the academic coach, the state director, the student success coordinator, the counselor, the elementary academic coach, and teacher

representatives. Principal E said that she inherited the team from previous administration and did not know the selection criteria. One of the leadership teams in School F was known as the Steering Committee, which was comprised of the principal, the two assistant principals, and each of the grade chairs, which were selected by the principal. Another leadership team was the Change Committee. This team was comprised of the media specialist and volunteered grade-level teachers responsible for whatever issues that needed to be resolved to constantly meet the needs of the students. This team was also responsible for school-wide procedural changes and policy – setting standards and goal.

Leadership Accountability. All of the administrators were not consistently involved with the monitoring and follow-up of activities from the PLCs.

School D's School Improvement Leadership Team (SILT) was responsible for monitoring student attendance, teacher attendance, student behavior, data-driven interventions pertaining to extended learning time, and the short-term and long-term goals of the SIP. School E's Administrative Team monitored and discussed the data conducted from walkthroughs (also known as EWalks). These EWalks were designed around the instructional frameworks, thinking maps, writing, and the 5-step protocol. The administrators of School F admitted that a better job of follow-up and accountability on their part needed to take place.

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking and Input Opportunities. During the interviews and observations, teachers of School D, E, and F provided several examples of having opportunities to offer input and teachers of School F expressed how there was a culture of trust amongst their peers. However, the researcher did not hear or gather information that

fully supported a culture of risk-taking and trust throughout all schools.

During the leadership meetings in School D, members had an opportunity to share what was going on at grade level or in the department and bring concerns to administration. Both the assistant principal and Principal D concurred that they had inherited the teams from previous administration. However, voiced Principal D, "I want to extend the process to provide everyone a chance to serve. I want teachers who can redeliver and model expected behaviors." Teachers said that they felt empowered and stated if they had ideas, that it was not a problem to go to administration. One teacher said, "The idea may be tweaked, but it works out at the end." Another teacher said, "I think if any of us were to walk up to the administrator and we said we wanted to change something, or we want to do this, they would be opened to listen." Because of School D having new administrators, a mid-year pulse check was done to determine what areas the teachers thought the school was doing well in and what areas they thought needed more attention for the next school year.

A second team of School E was the Design Team, which consisted of the Administrative Team and teacher representatives from each grade. Principal E conveyed during the interview, she was not sure of the previous criteria for selection of the Design Team members of School E, but stated, "My goal is to have positive people who not only contribute to the school, but have it going on in the classroom as well." Teachers in School E said that they had the opportunity to make such decisions as conducting a remediation day during every class period and providing input on the grading policy. At the end of the PLC, teachers always were reminded to complete a professional learning

survey and leave in the designated basket. This survey was a 2-point Likert-scale of Agree or Disagree, which contained four survey items and four open-ended constructed questions. The researcher did observe teachers completing this survey after each PLC occurred. The academic coach and Principal E said that this survey was used to address future topics and allowed teachers to provide feedback concerning the PLC meetings. Teachers of School E stated, before Principal E came, they had not always made too many decisions or taken risks.

Principal F sent surveys to the faculty and staff for gathering anonymous responses about future factors that may affect the school, e.g., applying for technology grants and changing the grading policy. During the focus group interviews, one teacher said that they had been given the opportunity to participate in making some decisions on behalf of the school. These decisions included another way to conduct CRCT night with parents and a 3-day intense one-on-one instruction for students who needed additional help prior to the administering of the CRCT.

Shared and Supportive Leadership Analysis

The overall results of this critical element suggest that in both the high- and low-performing middle schools, teachers felt supported by administrators when they were selected to participate on leadership teams and were able to provide input to make decisions on behalf of students and the school. However, during this study, there was not enough evidence in support of a culture of trust and risk-taking being promoted amongst and between the staff and teachers and administrators. In addition, the researcher did not consistently see or hear where all teachers were being held accountable of instructional

practices on a daily basis.

Sub-question 6: Is the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

The researcher compared findings of the high-performing middle schools to the findings of the low-performing middle schools in their natural settings. Based on the results of the recorded focus-group interviews, observations, and review of documents and artifacts, there were no differences of the implementation of the critical element, Shared and Supportive Leadership. These qualitative findings are consistent with the quantitative results of the independent-samples t – test for critical element, Shared and Supportive Leadership, where there were no significant differences found in the implementation in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

Shared Values and Vision

Description: Staff shares vision for school improvement, focusing on student learning. Shared values support norms of behavior guiding decisions about teaching and learning (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

High-Performing Schools

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. All schools had a process for brainstorming the mission statements observed during the site visits. Again, teachers had opportunities to provide input, but at the time of study, the researcher did not observe any clear evidence of how they were involved in taking risk and creating norms and values that supported decisions for teaching and learning.

Participants from School A stated that their entire faculty brainstormed ideas for the mission, belief and values of the school as it related to students. They also made decisions such as outlining test-taking procedures to pacing of the curriculum, planning for instruction, identifying reading programs for students who did not qualify for SPED, and identifying and conducting professional learning based on the needs of the school.

Participants from School B responded that the leadership team brainstormed ideas for the mission, belief and values of the school. According to Principal B, leadership team members and the parent committee had opportunities to discuss and provide input. Due to budget constraints, Teachers of School B had not had the opportunity to participate in much professional learning as they had in the past.

The SILT of School C brainstormed ideas for the mission, belief and values of the school as it related to students. Teachers of School C had the opportunity sometimes to participate in a survey to determine professional learning.

Protocols and Norms. In both Schools A and C, all personnel were expected to attend PLCs, including administrators and non-certificated staff members. In School B, this was not the case; according to the teachers, the administrator came to make announcements. According to the description of shared values and vision, when all personnel are in attendance, it sets the stage for shared norms and expectations for student learning.

In School A, all certificated school personnel were expected to attend the PLCs. In addition, non-certificated personnel were encouraged to attend PLCs. The principal was always visible and a part of the PLCs. However, the assistant principal, who was

part-time, attended when available.

In School B, all teachers were expected to attend their PLC. Teachers said that the principal and academic coach were not required to attend, but would drop in occasionally. Usually, the principal and academic coach came because of a concern or the team members had invited them to come to address an issue. Teachers of School B said that sometimes the parent liaison stopped by the team meetings or the HS instructional coach came to discuss the response to intervention (RTI) strategies for students.

In School C, all certificated as well as non-certificated school personnel were expected to attend the PLCs. The certificated personnel also included the media specialist and counselors. The administrative staff of School C, consisting of one principal and three assistant principals, was always visible.

Various Modes of Communication. All schools had a process in place for communicating the decisions made surrounding the preliminary mission statements as well as the final one.

Teachers of School A said there were small group discussions, which led to whole group discussions before finalizing their mission statement. At School B, it was the leadership team representative's responsibility to share the mission statement ideas with their respective team members for discussion and input. Afterwards, the mission statement was brought before the entire faculty for final voting. In School C, the three top choices brainstormed in the SILT were emailed to the entire faculty and staff to provide them an opportunity to select the one that they felt best matched their beliefs and the needs of the students.

Low-Performing Schools

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. As evidenced in the data collected, there was very little evidence supporting a culture of trust, risk-taking, and input opportunities as it pertained to the mission, beliefs and values surrounding student learning. The researcher found in the data where only one school concentrated on the students when making decisions about the vision, yet it was not the entire school body.

The SILT team members of School D were made up of grade-level teachers, who showed an interest in the vision of the school. Teachers stated how they were concentrating more on what they should be doing and what the students should be doing during the opening, working, and closing sessions of class. When asked the question about how the mission statement was developed, the same response from all teachers echoed, "The SACS process that took place several years ago." Teachers said that the mission statement was developed by a Better Seeking Team (BST), but had not been revisited in two years. The assistant principal said, "Different teachers worked on the mission statement in different committees when they worked on SACS four years ago." Principal D stated that the mission statement was developed through the SACS process. Teachers of School E did not know how the mission statement evolved. Principal E confirmed that the mission statement was developed by the superintendent and was recited daily during the announcements. The Steering Committee of School F was responsible for brainstorming ideas for the mission, belief and values of the school. Teachers said, even though the mission statement was announced daily and posted throughout the school, it had not been revisited for change.

Protocols and Norms. All personnel at all of the schools were expected to attend the PLCs, including the administrators. However, School E was the only school where the administrators attended on a regular basis.

During the interviews with the teachers at School D, when the researcher asked which personnel was expected to attend the Professional Learning Team (PLT) meetings, some teachers stated that administrators were not expected to attend and some teachers said all administrators were expected to attend. Principal D stated, "I want to keep up with the learning and know what is to be expected when I'm in the classrooms. Sometimes I'm able to attend the PLTs and sometimes I'm not." The assistant principal stated, "Administrators try to rotate each time between the grades." The researcher observed the assistant principal attending the seventh-grade PLT and Principal D attending the eighth-grade PLT. Principal D said, "Because of this new knowledge, administrators can provide effective feedback."

School E's teachers said everybody was expected to attend their PLCs including the administrators. In addition, teachers were expected to follow up with assignments from the PLCs. Principal E stated that teachers were to come prepared with a sample of student work, a writing sample, or a sample assessment.

When teachers of School F were asked to describe a typical PLC and who was required to come, one teacher said, "PLCs haven't been as formal as they were in the beginning of the year." In another PLC focus group interview a teacher said, "Something always happens. Circumstances get in the way, the expectations are mounting, but there is no time to complete all of the expected tasks." Teachers stated that they all were expected

to attend PLCs; however, there were conflicting schedules. Because many teachers had to teach two content areas, grade-level teachers often did not have the opportunity to consistently participate in their respective PLCs. They also voiced, that the administrative staff had initially attended PLCs at the beginning of the year, but had not been as visible throughout the year. Principal F too agreed that the administrative staff had not attended PLCs, as they would have liked. The assistant principal said, "We don't get into very many. We try to go in each week at least once."

Various Modes of Communication. Teachers of Schools D, E, and F all had their mission statement communicated to them from upper leadership within the district, from the SACS process. Even though the mission statement came from the district level, it was recited daily in Schools E and F over the intercom and posted throughout all of the schools.

Shared Values and Vision Analysis

The overall results of this critical element suggest that in both the high- and low-performing middle schools, not all certificated and non-certificated personnel were expected to attend PLCs and participate in brainstorming choices for professional learning and the belief and mission statement of the school. The evidence from the observations and interviews supports the inconsistent implementation of this critical element. All participants spoke of the various ways that ideas for the belief and mission statement were communicated; through small group, whole group, emails, surveys, and face-to-face representatives from the leadership teams. However, at the time of this study, the researcher was not able to connect how this process supported the values and norms

of promoting learning and achievement for all students.

Sub-question 7: Is the implementation of shared values and vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

The researcher compared findings of the high-performing middle schools to the findings of the low-performing middle schools in their natural settings. Based on the results of the recorded focus-group interviews, observations, and review of documents and artifacts, there were no differences for the implementation of the critical element, Shared Values and Vision. These qualitative findings are consistent with the quantitative results of the independent-samples t – test for critical element, Shared Values and Vision, where there were no significant differences found in the implementation in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

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Collective Learning and Application

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Description: Staff at all levels seek knowledge, skills and strategies; share information; work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, improve learning opportunities, and apply to their work (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

High-Performing Schools

Protocols and Norms. Evidence in the data supports staff of all levels seeking knowledge and working collaboratively on a regular basis to improve learning for students in Schools A and C.

In School A, all teachers and administrators helped with planning for instruction. Principal A stated that she met every nine weeks with the faculty by grade level during

their planning to review student report cards, progress reports, teachers' next steps, and their teacher effectiveness rubric. In School B, all teachers helped with planning for instruction. Lessons were planned and taught based on the GPS frameworks and curriculum map. Planning took place during the school day at the scheduled grade-level planning times. In School C, all teachers, administrators, and academic coaches, helped with planning for instruction. This was done in the content grade-level PLCs. During the observation of the PLCs, the assistant principals explained to the teachers that the academic coaches and administrators would be writing an example of a professional growth plan (PGP) for middle school.

Various Types of Professional Development. During the observations and data gathering process, Schools A and C had PLCs that were focused on improving teaching strategies in the classroom, which teachers said would impact student learning. Even though School B used their planning time for PLCs and some student issues were discussed, their collaborative time was more about managerial issues.

School A had two PLCs, which were held twice a month – one as a Whole Faculty Study Group (WFSG) and one as a Content Area Group. Teachers were conducting a book study and presenting Chapter 5 of the *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning* by Jan Chappuis. They came prepared to discuss the study guide and questions. Teachers of School B stated there was not a true professional learning committee because they did not have the opportunity to collaborate formally within their content areas.

Principal B voiced that due to budget constraints, teachers of School B did not have the opportunity to participate in much professional learning as they had in the past.

In School B, teachers from each content area initially attended the Georgia Performance

Standards (GPS) sessions for professional development and redelivered to their peers and

some teachers attended professional learning workshops on differentiation and

technology. Teachers stated that the academic coach or the principal provided other

professional learning. Principal B would present information that was obtained from a

meeting or workshop that he attended. Book studies had been done in the past, but had

not occurred during the time of this study. Teachers of School B stated when they had

attended professional learning, observed other teachers, or had the opportunity to discuss

the standards, it positively influenced their instructional practices, which caused the

students to become more engaged, and raised student achievement. One teacher said,

"The differentiation conference that I attended made it interesting for station rotations in

the classrooms." Many teacher teachers talked about how the hands-on strategies

increased students' interest and achievement on assessments. Academic Coach B said that

she conducted observations daily, not necessarily on all teachers, but shared the results

with the teachers. In both of the content PLCs, the researcher had an opportunity to

observe the SPED teachers sharing data analysis of their students with disabilities (SWD)

with the content teachers. These data of academic performances had come from their

benchmark assessments.

Each of the administrators of School C had rotational assignments to facilitate the

CLASS Keys modules throughout the month during the PLCs. These rotational

assignments were assigned at the beginning of the school year. According to the teachers

and administrators, these rotational assignments provided administrators an opportunity

to be actively engaged and supportive of teachers in the knowledge and learning of new skills. Teachers of School C stated that PLCs were held as a grade level PLC and as a content area PLC. School C had their Collaborative Learning (grade level) PLC on Module 4 of the Classroom Analysis of State Standards (CLASS) Keys – Professional Growth Development. During the observation of their Collaborative Learning PLC, one of the assigned assistant principals facilitated and instructed teachers to identify their areas of strength and areas that needed improvement. Teachers were then asked to create a professional growth plan for the areas that needed improvement. A second assistant principal assisted with monitoring the activity. Principal C was present and provided input as needed.

Access to Multiple Sources of Data **and** *Various Types of Assessments*. All of the schools had access to data from various types of assessments. In addition, teachers of Schools A and C spoke about how they had developed progress monitoring charts for all students at their school and how these charts were kept during the tenure of the middle school student. However, the researcher was not able to view any of these documents, therefore not confirming if individual learning profiles were developed for each student to promote student learning.

Teachers of School A said, "We could talk about data all day. How much time do you have?" Data were used from all forms of assessments and observations, and not just the CRCT. Data sources included warm-up exercises, tickets-out-the door, quizzes, 9 weeks exams, strands that showed area of weakness, benchmarks, formative assessments, Standardized Test for Assessment in Reading (STAR), administrators' feedback, teachers'

feedback, the teacher effectiveness rubric, peer observations, awareness walks, district

vertical team meetings, the book studies, and previous lesson plans.

Teachers of School B said they used a variety of instruments for data. Data

sources included CRCT strands that showed area of weaknesses, pre-tests, post-tests,

benchmarks created by the academic coach, formative assessments, summative

assessments, item analysis generated from Study Island and STAR Math, and lesson

plans. Teachers of School C said they used all forms of assessments and observations,

and not just the CRCT. Data sources included tickets-out-the door, quizzes, 9 weeks

exams, strands that showed area of weakness, benchmarks, formative assessments,

administrators' feedback, teachers' feedback, awareness walks, and from previous year's

lesson plans. In addition, all teachers maintained a progress-monitoring sheet for each

student. Principal C said that administrators, academic coaches, and teachers analyzed the

data on a regular basis to determine students' strengths and weaknesses. She further

stated that this process allowed teachers to use their instructional time effectively and

provided interventions when students were not making adequate progress.

Low-Performing Schools

Protocols and Norms. Collaboration took place in all schools, but not consistently

and not based on professional learning for students in all schools.

Planning time in School D was set aside in a collaborative setting for teachers to

look at pacing guides and unit plans to prepare lessons and common assessments. In

School E, teachers said that during planning time – something took place every day.

"True" planning may happen once or twice a week. Teachers used planning time to meet

with parents, their team, participate in PLCs, and student advisement. School E's

Administrative Team, which was comprised of Principal E, both assistant principals, the

academic coach, and the SPED system coordinator were responsible for deciding the next

focus of the PLCs. All teachers of School F helped with planning for instruction. Lessons

were planned and taught based on the GPS frameworks and curriculum map. However,

due to budget constraints, the district did not provide substitute teachers when the regular

teachers were absent. Hence, teachers of School F often had to cover for other teachers

during their planning.

Various Types of Professional Development. During the observations and data

gathering process, Schools D and E had PLCs that were focused on improving teaching

strategies in the classroom, which teachers said would impact student learning. Even

though School F had planning time for grade-level PLCs, their collaborative time was

more about managerial issues.

School D had two different PLCs. The academic coach of School D facilitated the

Professional Learning Team (PLT) PLC. During the time of this research, teachers were

studying Module 4 of the CLASS Keys and conducting a book study on *"Seven*

Strategies of Assessment for Learning" by Jan Chappuis. During the observations, the

researcher was able to hear discussions on previously brainstormed assessment strategies

(summarizing and note-taking strategies, higher-order questioning, visuals, and sticky

notes) being applied in the professional learning. The instructional coach said the she had

also witnessed evidence of teachers applying what they had learned from the PLTs in

their classrooms. The second PLC occurred weekly on Thursdays with teachers in a

collaborative setting looking at pacing guides and unit plans to prepare lessons and common assessments. The assistant principal of School D also talked about a third form of PLCs involving vertical meetings that took place each month. Each content area (math, ELA, science, and social studies) had a designated Monday afternoon for them to meet. Math teachers participated in a fourth PLC, which occurred across the district. Teachers met vertically to receive math professional learning, which discussed pacing guides, math units, and created and shared lesson plans.

During the observations of PLCs at School E, teachers were studying the CLASS Keys standard, Assessment of Learning (AL) 1.3 and were focusing on Depth of Knowledge (DOK) and the individual level on assessments. Principal E said, "The goal is for the teachers to carry over their professional learning into the classroom." On Fridays, teachers had team collaboration where they discussed students at risk, housekeeping items, and any other concerns. Principal F said, "Professional learning has taken a hit because of budget issues. However, math teachers had benefited from a math grant that led to extensive training for them in the use of technology." He also said some professional learning took place at the system level, while other professional learning took place during faculty meetings, and PLC meetings. Math teachers of School F concurred that they were recipients of a Title-II D Technology Grant, which allowed them to participate in professional learning from their local RESA.

Access to Multiple Sources of Data **and** *Various Types of Assessments*. All of the schools had access to data from various types of assessments. However, Schools D and E were the schools that seem to emerge in examining data more closely for student

learning.

Teachers of School D stated that they had not been totally data-driven and this was a weak area for them. Both Principal D and the assistant principal concurred. However, the data that were used came from the CRCT scores and Data Director. Teachers stated that they also used the GPS, benchmarks, frameworks, pretests, and both formative and summative assessments to help plan for instruction. Teachers of School E said that School E was data-driven, and used several forms of assessments. These data included the GPS, benchmarks, frameworks, and pretests to help plan for instruction. They used both formative and summative assessments to help determine the weaknesses' of students. This data assisted teachers in identifying who needed to attend the attendance/credit recovery sessions. The researcher was able to observe the attendance data chart in the data room documenting the progress that had been made. Teachers of School F used a variety of instruments for data purposes. They included lesson plans, quizzes, CRCT strands, benchmarks, formative and summative assessments, and the item analysis generated from the CPS. Principal F also said that this data drove the RTI decisions for placing students in intervention groups. The assistant principal of School F said, "Teachers are supposed to bring common assessment data to the PLCs and compare. Every teacher receives a breakdown of their test scores in the faculty meetings. The intention is for teachers to exchange ideas."

Collective Learning and Application Analysis

The overall results of this critical element suggest that in both the high- and low-performing middle schools, teachers had opportunities to participate in collaborative

learning at the whole school, content, grade, and district level. This professional learning included a variety of topics, such as book studies, professional growth plans, assessment strategies, and data sharing. These PLCs were all facilitated by either teacher leaders, instructional coaches, or by a member of the administrative staff. Finally, all teachers had access to multiple sources of data and utilized several forms of assessments. Even though Schools A and C talked about using progress-monitoring sheets for students, Schools A, C, D, and E had data rooms displaying student data, and Schools B and F had intense remediation sessions, none of the schools showed evidence of truly examining all data for promoting achievement for all students.

Sub-question 8: Is the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

The researcher compared findings of the high-performing middle schools to the findings of the low-performing middle schools in their natural settings. Based on the results of the recorded focus-group interviews, observations, and review of documents and artifacts, there were no differences for the implementation of the critical element, Collective Learning and Application. These qualitative findings are consistent with the quantitative results of the independent-samples $t-$ test for critical element, Collective Learning and Application, where there were no significant differences found in the implementation in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

Shared Personal Practice

Description: Peers visit and observe one another to offer encouragement and provide feedback on instructional practices to assist in student achievement and increase

individual and organizational capacity (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

High-Performing Schools

Leadership Support. Teachers of School A and C expressed how the administrators were in and out of their rooms on a daily basis causing the level of leadership support to be better. Teachers said that it was better because they were not just receiving visits during end-of-year evaluations.

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. Schools A and C had a structured process in place for peer observations, while teachers of School B had an unstructured process. The researcher heard the participants offering suggestions during the observations, but did not have the opportunity to observe these practices during classroom instruction.

In School A, the researcher observed that teachers appeared comfortable sharing and communicating the areas of strengths and areas that needed growth. In one PLC group, the researcher heard, "We need to adjust instruction. We need to encourage practice and convey to students that the concept can be mastered." In another PLC group, the researcher heard, "We all agree that we haven't worked on multiple-choice (eliminating choices)." Another teacher in that same group said, "I want them to be better strategists." In a third PLC group, the researcher heard, "We've already implemented the multiple-choice strategy." Yet, in a fourth PLC group, the researcher heard, "Teachers, we need to pay attention to the wrong answers that students choose. We need to understand their thinking." In that same PLC group, the researcher heard, "We need to have students explain why this is the correct answer for the multiple-choice; that's critical

thinking." Still another teacher said, "In my opinion if we all used this method some, maybe the students could grasp the reasons for wrong answers." and "We need to adjust instruction for rigor and differentiation." Teachers of School A observed and provided feedback to each other twice in the fall and twice in the spring of the year. One teacher stated, "This process has become second nature to us and does not propose any threats."

While observing the PLCs in School B, the researcher heard the following comments, "The bar is set high – we don't let students depend on us all the time." However, in another PLC group, the researcher heard a second teacher say, "Science is going to become a second indicator for making AYP; we've got to start raising the bar." Yet another teacher exclaimed, "Our students are not going to measure up in a global environment," as reference was being made to the mission statement. One teacher raised the question, "What strategies are we going to teach to prepare them for the standardized test?" One teacher said, "School C is always looking at ways to enhance children's learning. Many resources and ideas have come from the student teachers." A second teacher said, "Once you receive information, ideas are rebuilt or modified to best fit the needs of the teachers and their students." During the interviews at School C, teachers said because there had been many discussions on improvement, they had become more comfortable sharing with each other. They stated that even though a teacher was not in the same content area or on the same team, personal practices, best practices, resources, websites, and worksheets were shared. One teacher said, "The content meetings are where you really get a chance to see what other teachers are doing in their classrooms." Other teachers said that sharing exemplars and instructional leaders' observations had

affected them tremendously. Feedback was encouraged amongst peers and administrators, said the teachers. A veteran teacher said, "Having once been on the NI list, you were able to realize improvement in teaching strategies became improvement for student learning."

Various Modes of Communication. Communication appeared to be very strong amongst and between the teachers within all of the schools. All teachers expressed how important sharing instructional practices improved their instruction and provided continued support.

Teachers in School A said they conversed with each other to make sure that they were on the same page. They worked together to find the best resources and find various resources. Teachers said that they made sure that they stayed abreast of their partner's pacing and created common assessments in every content area except social studies. School A had a Share Fair twice a year. The Share Fair gave teachers an opportunity to communicate what they had learned throughout the year from their professional learning and how they had applied it in the classrooms. Several teachers voiced that the Share Fairs and peer observations, along with the PLCs were effective and had become very helpful for improving the teaching practices and student learning. Teachers at School A met in the hallways, communicated via email talked over the phone from home, talked in the car while carpooling, and met during the summer. Teachers of School B who live in neighboring communities, had the opportunity to informally meet, calling each other on the phone, discussing in the grocery store, in-service days, and making use of "hall" meetings. However, most of their planning time was used for discussing student progress or issues and meeting with parents. The researcher experienced this when one of the PLC

groups was shortened due to an unscheduled parent conference. SPED teachers of School B had an opportunity to meet daily. Because they shared the same room, they were able to share students' progress and instructional strategies they were using to promote student achievement. Their meetings took place every morning. Teachers of School C said that forms of collaboration did not just take place formally; sometimes it was in the hallways and after school. Teachers conversed with each other to make sure that they were on the same page. They worked together to find the best resources and various resources. Teachers communicated to each other to make sure that they stayed abreast of the instructional pacing of their content partner. Furthermore, teachers developed common assessments, looked at student work, or shared and discussed what worked or did not work in the classroom for a particular lesson or for particular students.

Protocols and Norms. Even though teachers stated that they had a structure in place for observing their peers and communicated often, the researcher did not have evidence of all schools looking at student work to make decisions about peer observations or improving instructional practices.

In School A, planning periods had been designated for teachers to collaborate to create common assessments or to look at student work. In School B, planning was the only common time teachers had to share what was taking place in their classrooms. Planning was used for discussing student progress or issues, meeting with parents, tutoring students, and conducting small group and one-on-one instruction. For those who coached, some of their planning was used for preparing for any sports issues that needed attended to. In School C, all teachers helped with planning for instruction in content area

meetings. Their planning time also included IEP, SST, 504, or parent meetings.

Low-Performing Schools

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking and Input Opportunities. The culture of teacher

taking risks amongst each other as it pertained to providing feedback to their peers

surfaced. This was evident in the discussions during the observations as captured by the

researcher.

While observing PLTs of School D, teachers were given the opportunity to work

in pairs and review the emerging and proficiency column for demonstrating research-

based practices that engages student learning from the Standards Based Instruction (SBI)

unit of the CLASS Keys. The academic coach instructed the teachers to make foldables,

describing their areas of strengths and weaknesses. The researcher heard some of the

following comments made as teachers worked: "We should be observing each other."

"This is good discussion!" and "We need to provide students with a clear and

understandable vision of the learning target." During the closing of the PLT, one of the

PLT teacher-pairs said, "We need to provide examples of strong and weak work related to

the learning target." Another teacher-pair stated, "We need to provide descriptive oral and

written feedback."

Teachers of School E conducted peer observations weekly, based on their content

area. Teachers were required to use a provided checklist to make warm comments (what

worked well) and cool comments (what needed to be adjusted) or ask questions. Teachers

stated that the feedback was compiled and provided to the teachers. Teachers of School F

expressed how the PLCs after school were the only common times teachers had to share

what was taking place in their classrooms.

Various Modes of Communication. Based on the data, teachers really wanted to have the opportunity to observe and share their experiences as it related to student learning.

Even though School D did not have a formal schedule, teachers shared how some of them had had the opportunity to provide feedback to other teachers. Teachers of School D said they were glad that they were studying the CLASS Keys. The connections teachers expressed how the study of the CLASS Keys allowed them to make a connection with their individual standards and the content teachers said that every student would now have the same experience no matter what class they were in – regular education or special education. The researcher asked the teachers at School E how the observations and comments were used. Teachers responded, "At this time, comments are anonymous." However, teachers did express they would welcome the opportunity to discuss the feedback openly with their peers. Teachers in School F said that they would really like to have the opportunity to observe their peers' instruction. They said that it would allow them to draw ideas from each other and improve their instruction. Most teachers said, "We never have an opportunity to observe our peers." One of the new teachers expressed how other teachers sharing their practices had affected her tremendously.

Protocols and Norms. Some teachers in School D had the opportunity to provide feedback to other teachers, yet there was not a formal schedule allowing them to conduct peer observations. Teachers said that it had been done in the past. However, when teachers did have the opportunity to share, it was about the implementation of the 5-step

protocol that they had learned from the PLCs. Teachers of School E conducted peer observations weekly and based on their content area. Teachers were required to use the provided checklist to provide comments to their peers. While interviewing the assistant principal and instructional leader of School F she said, "We don't do peer observations. It's not happening. I take full responsibility for that. One of the issues is how to give peer feedback." A teacher said, "Teachers have the opportunity to observe others. The time is available here. However, it's not mandated."

Shared Personal Practices Analysis

The overall results of this critical element suggest that in both the high- and low-performing middle schools, teachers welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback to one another; however; this aspect of the element was not fully implemented. Teachers often made comments about the areas that they felt needed improving and cherished the moments of areas that were working. Teachers were glad to be involved in common planning where they could create common lesson plans and assessments. Finally, teachers often communicated formally and informally, but the researcher did not hear or observe teachers discussing and sharing data as it related to student work.

Sub-question 9: Is the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

The researcher compared findings of the high-performing middle schools to the findings of the low-performing middle schools in their natural settings. Based on the results of the recorded focus-group interviews, observations, and review of documents

and artifacts, there were no differences for the implementation of the critical element,

Shared Personal Practices. These qualitative findings are consistent with the quantitative

results of the independent-samples $t-$ test for critical element, Shared Personal Practices,

where there were no significant differences found in the implementation in high-

performing and low-performing middle schools.

Supportive Conditions

Description: Collegial relationships include respect, trust, and norms. Structural

support includes communication systems, proximity of staff, time, and space for staff to

meet to examine practices (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

High-Performing Schools

Access to Multiple Resources (Human and Technological). All of the schools'

staff were in proximity of each other and had systems in place for communicating and

sharing resources. Based on the observations and conversations, all teachers appeared to

have a collegial relationship that included trust and respect for each other.

School A had a significant amount of technological resources, which included a

computer for every two students, CPS units, laptops, and computer labs. School A

utilized Georgia's Online Assessment System (OAS), older versions of printable CRCT

items, and COACH books. Their human resources included the media specialist, the

instructional leader, their local RESA, the system's Curriculum Director, and the District

Vertical Team meetings. School B's technological resources included having access to the

computer program Study Island. Their human resources included the Global Learning

Resource Services (GLRS), their local RESA, the counselor, the academic coach, and the

media specialist. Teachers of School C had a significant amount of resources and were able to get what was needed at the appropriate time. They had access to a computer lab in each of the grade-level buildings, the Media Center (Discovery Center), and students had access to net books in the classroom. In addition, they utilized the OAS benchmarks in every content area available by the state, their local college, their local RESA, and their instructional coaches.

Protocols and Norms. All schools had a time set aside for some form of collaboration. Schools A and C held professional learning during the school day per grade and per content level, while School B collaborated during their planning time by grade level.

Teachers of School A shared that they were on a block schedule and had 85 minutes to collaborate with subject areas within each grade. Thursdays at School A were designated for collaboration during the school day for lesson planning, creating common assessments, or looking at students' work. The WFSG and Content Area PLCs occurred every other Wednesday after school and began at 3:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Teacher discussions occurred through email and face-to-face with content chairs and grade-level persons. Teachers of School B shared that their planning took place during the school day at the scheduled grade-level planning time of 90 minutes. Teachers at School B said their PLCs were scheduled for Tuesdays and Thursdays of each week for the content teachers, and Mondays and Tuesdays for the exploratory teachers where everyone was expected to attend. Teachers of School C met every Tuesday for 45 minutes during their grade-level planning time in Staff Development Room # 17 for the Collaborative Learning PLC and

every Thursday during teachers' planning time for the Content PLCs.

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. All teachers talked about the development of trust amongst themselves. School C had inherited a new principal and was in the transformational stages of promoting a culture of trust amongst the school. However, the researcher did not hear or observe many instances surrounding the opportunity of many personnel taking risks.

When inquiring about the culture of the school, Teachers of school A made the following statements: "The trust was developed. It's so there! It's always been like this. Input is welcomed and encouraged." Another teacher while referring to the principal said, "Honest Observations! She knows! Always in your room! She trusts our judgment." The AP said, "The principal had the vision for the staff and she slowly educated everyone." Other teachers agreed, "The school as a whole, very close, very compassionate. If it works in one class, it's shared with everyone. This doesn't go on in all the schools." An example of this was when a particular group could not meet as a whole on the assigned day; it was the expectation and understanding that that particular group made the necessary arrangements for follow-through.

When the researcher asked how the culture of trust had been developed in School B, teachers said that they felt supported when the academic coach or principal came to their classrooms during instructional time. Teachers of School B voiced that a culture of trust was strong amongst each other. They voiced that a lot of work was done that was not noticed or recognized by administration. Principal C stated, "A culture of trust is developed by being respectful to each other and honest." Teachers and one of the

assistant principals of School C said that a culture of trust was evolving with the transition of new leadership and new behaviors. Feedback was encouraged amongst peers and administrators, said the teachers. Teachers said that they had had many discussions on improvement and had become more comfortable sharing with each other.

In School A, teachers had the opportunity to celebrate each other via their ABC – Above and Beyond Character recognition plan. A bulletin board of handwritten sticky notes was visible outside of the data room. The instructional leader said that this was a form of celebration, which gave teachers the opportunity to complement each other. Some teachers expressed that the district curriculum leader had celebrated them as well. Another form of celebration came from one of the school partners. Teachers and members of the staff were selected each month and were honored with a display of their picture hanging outside of the front office in the main hallway. Principal B voiced celebrations for teachers were few and needed to be better. All teachers echoed with the same response and commented that the lack of appreciation was what caused them to depend heavily on their teammates and on other teachers throughout the school. However, teachers said that they did recognize one another. One of the assistant principals of School C said that Wonderful Wednesday was a form of celebration that took place every week. The administrators facilitated this celebration to recognize teachers.

Various Modes of Communication. Teachers of School A talked about how they conversed with each other constantly to make sure that they were on the same page. School B did not have other content peer to confer with. In School C, the instructional

coaches passed around samples of exemplars and shared what they had seen in the classrooms.

Low-Performing Schools

Access to Multiple Resources (Human and Technological). All of the schools' staff were in proximity of each other and had systems in place for communicating and sharing resources. Based on the observations and conversations, all teachers appeared to have a collegial relationship that included trust and respect for each other.

The resources of School D included Data Director, Brain Pop United Streaming, Mimio boards and tablets, a mounted projector, document cameras, three mobile computer labs, one stationary computer lab, and teacher folders on Google Apps. The human resources included the academic coach, the district academic coach, the representative from their local RESA, and the media specialist. Teachers of School E had access to the following resources: Drop Box (a free computer application where teachers could share benchmark data, framework data, lessons, grades, etc., and work from home). They also had access to their local RESA, the academic coach, the student success coach, the assistant principal, and the principal. Every teacher had a LCD projector, an Elmore (document camera), a smart board, a computer lab, and COACH books. In addition, the ELA department had received a grant. Teachers of School F had the following resources available to them: computer performance systems (CPS), a computer in every classroom and a second computer if they taught reading/English language arts; students had access to several computer labs. Their human resources included the assistant principal, the local RESA, the graduation coach, the counselor, and the instructional coach from the high

school. Teachers said that the media specialist also had assisted them and taught a class on research.

Protocols and Norms. All schools had a time set aside for some form of collaboration. Schools D and E held professional learning during the school day per grade and per content level. School F collaborated during their planning time by separate teams within each grade level and after school by content level.

The PLCs of School D took place every Wednesday in Data Room 305. The School Improvement Leadership Team met every first and third Wednesday following the principals' meetings on Tuesdays. The content meetings took place every Thursday for collaboration and on Fridays by grade level. Teachers expressed that they met informally as well. The PLCs of School E occurred every Wednesday during teacher planning time in Data Room 113 for 50 minutes. The Administrative Team of School E met weekly on Fridays at 1:30 p.m. The Administrative Team also oversaw the attendance recovery class, which occurred every other Monday from 3:15 p. m. to 7:15 p.m. This time was set aside for students to come and complete missing assignments and receive credit for days missed (second AYP indicator). Teachers stated that the PLCs at School F were scheduled to occur weekly on Mondays and Wednesdays after school, however there were always conflicts. Teachers of School F had a PLC template for capturing the minutes. The Change Committee met monthly on Thursdays; however, teachers said that they had not met in a while.

Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities. All teachers talked about the development of trust amongst and between themselves. School E had inherited

a new principal and was in the transformational stages of promoting a culture of trust amongst the school. However, the researcher did not hear or observe many instances surrounding the opportunity of many personnel taking risks.

When asked about a culture of trust, two of the interviewed teams expressed that teachers were very close in School D and could sense when any one of them was down or when morale was low. Another teacher shared how teachers were there for one another. One teacher from School E said, "A culture of trust was changing. Teachers are becoming more student-centered with the emphasis on student learning." In School F, one of the teachers said, "The principal is very discrete in disclosing information when it is not pertinent to others. He would never point out or embarrass someone in a faculty meeting." Other teachers said, "He (the principal) allows us to take risks and try new procedures."

For celebrations, the teachers of School D had received throughout the year T-shirts, pens, a cup, cookies, and Snickers. Another incentive that teachers had was an opportunity to have their names drawn to receive a free meal from a nice local restaurant. Principal E voiced that celebrations had not been done much for teachers. During the time of birthdays, teachers had received a small birthday cake. Sometimes emails were sent out with "Great job!" or a note was placed on lesson plans. She further stated that some teachers had received private praises. To show appreciation for all of the efforts that teachers had made in School F, Principal F stated that he provided a power lunch once a month. This one hour power lunch was given to randomly selected teacher groups while the administrative and office staff covered the teachers' classes.

Various Modes of Communication. At School D, during one set of the focus group interviews, two teachers who shared common lesson plans spoke how red sticky notes were utilized to indicate that a modification was needed after instruction had been delivered. At School E, teachers participated in a Gallery Walk. This process allowed teachers to observe student work and use sticky notes to provide comments or ask questions as they pertained to the standards and tasks. Teachers of School E said that they used this form of communication to revisit and adjust lesson plans as needed. At School F, since teachers did not have an opportunity to collaborate with their content partner by grade-level, the math teachers said that they discussed lessons while having lunch. Teachers also said that when covering for a teacher who was absent, they would take the opportunity to look for techniques or strategies that they could use in their classroom.

Supportive Condition Analysis

The overall results of this critical element suggest that in both the high- and low-performing middle schools, teachers had access to an assortment of resources, which included district, administrative, and local personnel (academic coach, RESA, etc.), as well as technology, which included computers, laptops, and computer labs. Four of the six schools had data rooms where teachers could meet for professional learning and have access to data. All teachers had scheduled times for collaborative planning and professional learning. Most of the professional learning took place during the school day; however, professional learning took place after school as well.

Even though all of the schools had staff that was in proximity of each other, they were emerging into creating a culture of trust. There were patterns amongst and between

the high- and low-performing schools where teachers had not had many opportunities to be celebrated. Finally, Schools B and F shared a pattern of not having true professional learning time or consistent professional learning.

Sub-question 10: Is the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school different and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?

The researcher compared findings of the high-performing middle schools to the findings of the low-performing middle schools in their natural settings. Based on the results of the recorded focus-group interviews, observations, and review of documents and artifacts, there were no differences for the implementation of the critical element, Supportive Conditions. These qualitative findings are consistent with the quantitative results of the independent-samples *t* – test for critical element, Supportive Conditions, where there were no significant differences found in the implementation in high-performing and low-performing middle schools.

Response to Over-arching Research Question 2

Overarching Question 2: *If differences do exist, are there patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools?*

Even though the researcher did not find any significant differences from the quantitative results, based on the results from the interviews, observations, documents, and analysis from the qualitative research, the researcher did find patterns that existed amongst and between the high-performing and low-performing schools in the implementation of the critical elements.

Introducing the 6th Critical Element – Shared Examination of All Student Data

Because of the interview and observation data reviewed, the researcher heard and witnessed many conversations surrounding at-risk students (students who scored < 785), bubble students (students whose scores ranged from 785 to 815), and students with disabilities (SWD). However, the researcher did not hear or see evidence of student achievement data being discussed for the students who did not fall into those categories (i.e., students who had already exceeded the CRCT ($\geq$ 850) and students who met the standard or close to exceeding ($\geq$ 816 to 849)). Since student achievement for all students is critical to the values, missions, and beliefs in education, the researcher established a sixth critical element, *Shared Examination of All Student Data* of PLCs. This critical element means not just having access to multiple sources of student data, but also actually implementing and monitoring an individual plan for all students to achieve, using the multiple sources of student data. Table 38 shows the relationship to the PLCA-R survey items and how it creates a theme of *making the most of the multiple sources of data*.

Table 38

Introducing Sixth Critical Element of PLC

New PLC Critical Element	Related PLCA-R Survey Item #	Theme
Shared Examination of All Student Data	17, 19, 20, 28, 29, 30, 42, 48, 52	*Making the Most of the Multiple Sources of Data*

Shared Examination of All Student Data

Description: Staff at all levels maximizing student data to the fullest by seeking and sharing knowledge, skills and strategies to implement individual achievement plans for all students. (Bynes, 2011)

Access to Multiple Sources of Data. Teachers of School A had access to the Research and Vision Room (data room), which housed such artifacts as the SIPs, a CRCT data chart broken down by content, by subgroup, by grade, and by student, the Focus Team Notebook of minutes from the WSFG PLCs, the Design Team Notebook of minutes from the Design Team meetings containing discussions and corrections of the SIP, and CRCT and attendance data. Teachers of School B had access to the benchmark data for grouping of students (heterogeneous or homogeneous) for regular classroom instruction and for Bootcamp. Bootcamp was designed to address the reading/ELA and math weaknesses of students in order to prepare them for CRCT. Some teachers stated that this process was not as effective as it had been in times past.

Teachers of School C had access to the data room (Room # 17), which contained large laminated posters, reflecting the high-impact practices and its rubric, a 4-year comparison of CRCT scores, parking lot issues, and a student attendance and student

discipline data chart comparison by semester. The academic coach of School D said that she was responsible for creating test items for math benchmarks and looking at teacher-made tests, making sure they were aligned to the standards, in the format of the CRCT, and were at the depth of knowledge level higher than 1. In School E's data room, the researcher observed many charts and data posted. There were results from teacher efficacy self-assessment (reflection for CLASS Keys Assessment Strand), student work, (examples of strong work and weak work), student progress charts, attendance data for both teachers and students, discipline data, school improvement data, writing scores, targeted at-risk students that needed assistance for math and ELA/Reading based on CRCT scores, and 8th grade writing scores. Principal F said that they were working towards using assessments to provide data for differentiation in the standards base classroom.

This sixth critical element was discovered as the researcher had access to an assortment of artifacts and documents while visiting the schools. The researcher observed and heard many conversations supporting students who were at-risk, yet not all conversations and evidence supported student achievement for all students. Artifacts supporting this discovery were the 2008, 2009, and 2010 AYP reports for all schools. As the researcher analyzed other artifacts and documents, a reflection was made on one of the criterion of selecting schools for this study, who had or had not made AYP for three or more years consecutively. Each school needed a student participation rate of 95% or above on reading/English language arts and mathematics on the CRCT. Each school needed to meet or exceed the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) in reading/English

language arts and mathematics on the CRCT. Finally, each middle school had to show progress on attendance as the second indicator.

The AMO for 2008, 2009, and 2010 AYP academic performance in math was 59.5%, 59.5%, and 67.6% respectively. While, the AMO for 2008, 2009, and 2010 AYP academic performance in reading/English language arts remained 73.3% for all three years. Even though the researcher had access to all of the AYP reports, the researcher elected to re-examine the 2010 reports for each school as a point of reference for final analysis as it related to the examination of the implementation of the five critical elements in a PLC and the SIP. In addition, during the time of the study, the 2010 AYP report was the document most often used in the six schools as they created and revisited the SIPs, and as they planned for instruction and interventions (e.g., Bootcamp, ELT, Focus on Five, RTI, and after school programs).

The researcher created Table 39 to reflect an overall summary of the data for each of the six schools. As shown in Table 39, all schools met the participation rate and the overall AMO for both reading/English language arts and math. However, School D did not meet the second indicator for attendance. As shown in Table 39, even though the overall AMO was met with high percentages in ALL subgroups, none of the schools met the AMO for students with disabilities (SWD) in either of the content areas and all schools had less than 40% of their students to exceed on the CRCT.

Table 39

2010 AYP Data

Schools	Participation Rate	Reading/ELA AMO (73.3%)	SWD	% of Students Who Exceeded	Math AMO (67.6%)	SWD	% of Students Who Exceeded	Attendance Indicator
A	100%	93.7%	53.0%	28.6%	85.3%	63.6%	28.4%	9.8%
B	99.6%	85.9%	44.3%	17.3%	71.3%	28.6%	8.0%	8.4%
C	99.8%	90.5%	66.3%	20.9%	73.9%	50.9%	15.8%	8.4%
D	100%	89.4%	64.8%	18.9%	74.8%	36.0%	15.6%	**15.4%**
E	100%	88.9%	66.7%	30.7%	78.2%	54.8%	27.6%	8.8%
F	99.8%	89.2%	72.5%	23.1%	74.9%	43.8%	21.9%	10.2%

After several examinations of the data from the interviews, observations, and documents, the second artifact that the researcher re-examined was the 2010-2011 SIPs that were made accessible. As a result, the researcher found that all schools had identified measurable goals to improve student achievement across content areas and across all sub-groups. In five of the six selected schools, each content area identified a need to move students to the next level on the CRCT. However, only one of those five schools identified a specific goal of providing a more rigorous, challenging, and differentiated program of study for students who exceeded the standards. Yet, none of the schools identified an explicit goal of providing a differentiated program for all students to achieve. Therefore, to support the final analyses of data, the researcher examined the initial 2011 AYP data. This allowed the researcher to compare the 2010-2011 SIP's observed identified measurable goals to the actual student achievement outcome.

According to GADOE (2011), fewer Georgia schools made AYP due to the academic bar being raised in reading/English language arts CRCT Grades 3-8 and math

CRCT Grades 3-8. The AMO for 2011 AYP academic performance in math was raised

from 67.6% to 75.7%. The AMO for 2011 AYP academic performance in reading/English

language arts was raised from 73.3% to 80%.

The researcher created Table 40 to reflect an overall summary of the data for each

of the six schools. As shown in Table 40, all schools met the participation rate, the overall

AMO for both reading/English language arts, and the attendance rate. However, only

three of the schools met the AMO for math.

Table 40

2011 AYP Data

Schools	Participation Rate	Reading/ELA AMO (80%)	SWD	% of Students Who Exceeded	Math AMO (75.7%)	SWD	% of Students Who Exceeded	Attendance Indicator
A	99.7%	91.7%	68.6%	33.3%	90.6%	77.1%	35.3%	8.0%
B	99.6%	87.9%	8.8%	17.1%	**59.4%**	29.4%	7.2%	7.4%
C	99.7%	915%	76.2%	24.0%	**74.8%**	68.0%	17.4%	8.3%
D	99.8%	87.0%	54.5%	20.6%	**80.1%**	38.2%	20.7%	14.4%
E	100%	90.5%	66.1%	34.3%	83.5%	53.6%	31.0%	11.3%
F	99.8%	91.4%	74.3%	30.2%	83.0%	63.4%	24.1%	8.4%

Shared Examination of All Student Data Analysis

When the researcher examined the data further, the following information was

revealed:

1) School A tested 35 SWD; therefore, they did not have a subgroup. However,

their SWD did meet the AMO in math.

2) School B did not meet the AMO for overall students and SWD in math.

3) School C met the AMO in the overall subgroup in math by safe harbor. This

was due to the black student population not meeting the AMO in math.

4) School D met the AMO in the overall subgroup for math; however, did not meet the AMO in math and reading/English language arts because of SWD. In addition, they did not meet in math because of the black student population.

5) School E tested 28 SWD; therefore, they did not have a subgroup.

6) School F met the AMO for the overall subgroup; however, they did not meet in math with the black student population, made safe harbor in math with the SWD, and made confidence interval with the SWD in reading/ELA.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis of Research Findings

Senge (1990, 2006) found that learning organizations provided people an opportunity to create desired results by expanding the thinking patterns and collaboratively learning together at all levels. Senge stated that shared vision changes people's relationship with an organization, allows people to begin to work together, creates a common identity, establishes an overarching goal, provides directions to stay on course, fosters risk-taking and experimentation, and fosters long-term commitment. Even though there were no significant differences found between the implementation of the five critical elements in the high-performing and low-performing middle schools from the quantitative data, the researcher did take notice of the patterns that emerged from the observations, interviews, and artifacts of the qualitative data. The researcher hoped, because of this study, to fill the gap in literature of not having enough real-life implementation of critical elements of a professional learning community in both high-performing and low-performing middle schools that promoted student achievement.

To compare the implementation of the five critical elements in a PLC of the low-performing middle schools (D, E, and F) to the implementation of the five critical elements in a PLC of the high-performing middle schools (A, B, and C), the researcher visited each of the six middle schools for two days. On the first day, the researcher conducted observations of the PLCs and reviewed artifacts. On the second day, the researcher conducted audio-taped semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews.

Based on the quantitative (independent-sample *t*-tests) results, the researcher found no significant differences in the implementation of the five critical elements, Shared and Supportive Leadership; Shared Values and Vision; Collective Learning and Application; Shared Personal Practices; and Supportive Conditions amongst the high-performing and low-performing middle schools. Based on the qualitative (interviews, observations, and documentation and artifacts) results, the researcher found no differences in the implementation of the five critical elements. However, patterns were found amongst and between the schools.

According to Senge (1990, 2006), there are five disciplines vital to a learning organization. These disciplines: building shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, mental models, and systems thinking helps to build an organization. These disciplines, grouped into three areas, are referred to as legs, creating the three-legged stool model. The first leg, Aspiration, includes the disciplines, personal mastery and shared vision. The second leg, Reflective Conversation, includes the disciplines, mental models and team learning. The third leg, Understanding Complexity, includes the discipline of systems thinking. According to Senge, if any of the three legs (core learning capabilities for teams) is missing, the learning organizations functions improperly.

As evident in the findings of this study, both the high-performing and low-performing middle schools had embraced the three-legged stool model of organizations working together as a team. However, at the time of this study, this model was not clearly seen in all six schools.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

To accomplish the leg of Aspiration, decision-making, respect and trust, and risk-taking needed to be shared with all teachers and leaders in both the high-performing and low-performing schools. According to Hord and Sommers (2008), administrators and teachers should be committed to whatever it takes to enhance learning. Corallo and McDonald (2002) reported the low-performing schools that succeeded, included a strong focus and cohesion of instruction, included strong plans to improve student achievement, and included a strong collaboration of all staff personnel and administrators.

Even though there was some evidence of the implementation of shared and supportive leadership, it was not fully implemented in all of the schools. As the patterns emerged from the data collected, some teachers said they were supported when they were selected to participate as leaders; whereas others did not and did not know the criteria for selection of being a teacher leader. The evidence reveals that some teachers felt supported by administrators when they were asked to provide input on making decisions for the school. The evidence reveals that some teachers felt supported when administrators monitored professional learning beyond the PLCs and provided feedback. The evidence revealed that some teachers did not feel supported when they only received information and did not have opportunities for providing input. The evidence revealed that some teachers did not feel supported when administrator's visibility and participation was not a consistent part of the PLC culture. In addition, the researcher did not find many instances in the data where administrators supported and trusted teachers to take risks. Each time this question was asked during the interviews, silence was noted. These inconsistencies or

absences of support from leadership suggest that they were not fully committed to enhancing learning for all students.

Shared Values and Vision

Bolam et al. (2005) discovered that shared values and vision on student learning and collective responsibility for student learning were certainly critical elements of an effective PLC. This means that the collaborative focus of creating the vision, mission, and beliefs must be guided by the learning needs of all students and must be shared by all personnel who come in contact with students, and not just the teachers. Administrators must seek the knowledge and skills of promoting achievement for all students as well as support the vision consistently.

The researcher found that all schools had a process for creating a shared vision, yet it was not clear how it related to promoting the learning and achievement of all students. Some teachers and administrators in some of the high and low performing schools collaborated and created the vision, mission, and belief statements together; whereas at other high and low performing schools, teachers and administrators received the vision, mission, and belief statements from the district level and did not share in its creation or participate in its revisions as the learning needs of the teachers and students changed.

Collective Learning and Application

Glaser (2006) stated if schools are going to improve, learning has to be valued above anything else. Teachers must share ideas, learn from each other, support one another in the classroom as well as collaborative meetings, and dialogue has to be on

reflective practices where teachers examined the issues that were of greatest concern. Hord and Sommers (2008) stated that staff members should collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data and assess the effectiveness of instructional practices. Staff members must collaboratively analyze students' work to improve teaching and learning.

As evident in the data, in each of the schools both relationships and structures were needed to create a culture of collaboration, to accomplish the third leg, Understanding Complexity. The researcher found four of the six schools consistently engaged in some aspect of professional learning, where staff members worked together to receive new knowledge of skills and strategies for student learning. According to the results, each of the schools recognized the need for collaboration to improve student learning. While observing and interviewing, the participants of each of the schools had identified such skills and behaviors as reviewing their instructional practices, assessment practices, and depth of knowledge level of assessments as what they needed to know and learn to promote student learning. Even though there was evidence of this critical element implemented, based on the data collected, it was not fully implemented. All schools had collaborative times set aside, but all schools were not engaged in collaborative focuses on learning for all students, and not all personnel participated.

Shared Personal Practices

Hord and Sommers (2008) stated that teachers must be open and engaged in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas from all stakeholders. This dialogue should lead to continued inquiry, which then should lead to professional development that

focuses on teaching and learning, and all individuals and teams should have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.

The leg of Reflective Conversation, promoting behaviors of discussions surrounding observation of peers and providing feedback and sharing the responsibility for student learning was found in only four of the six schools. It was not evident that characteristics of desired goals were focused and intentional and achieved by collaboration of everyone. As evidenced in the data, teachers welcomed the opportunity to receive timely feedback from both their administrators and peers. Teachers also expressed how providing and receiving this feedback enhanced their instructional practices. Teachers voiced the need to share with their content partners; this sharing would allow them to create common assessments, common lesson plans, and engage in meaningful dialogue surrounding instructional practices. Even though teachers desired these opportunities, sharing their personal practices was not implemented in all of the schools.

Supportive Conditions

Hord and Sommers (2008) said that teachers must be able to converse frequently, horizontally, and vertically, and have agreement upon the work that needs to be taught, monitored, and measured. Teachers must be able to have a variety of opportunities and structures for collective learning. According to the results of the observations, all schools had staff that were in proximity of each other, allowing teachers to share and communicate practices informally. According to the results of the observations, all schools had a collaborative structure with allocated timeframes and had various modes of

communications. However, not all of the schools used the time for true professional learning to enhance student achievement and not all of the schools kept the collaborative time sacred when it was time for PLCs to be conducted. Furthermore, not all of the teachers felt that they had a culture of respect from administrators; while others expressed that the culture of trust and norms was emerging because of new administration.

Discussion of Research Findings

From these findings, the researcher was able to validate a connection with Senge's (1990, 2006) theory that if schools want to reach their highest potential, then all of the legs of the stool (full implementation of the critical elements) have to be in place to reach the aspirations of being a true high-performing school. Fleming and Kleinhenz (2007) indicated that all students could be high performers if teachers were held accountable for teaching and learning, if teachers had high expectations of academic achievement, and if teachers had high expectations of student behavior, while building relationships with the students. These high expectations are consistent with the six quality indicators of high-achieving schools (see Figure 3.1). Furthermore, the researcher was able to validate a connection with Hord and Sommer's (2008) theory of backward thinking. Teachers actually expressed, that when they identified what professional learning that they needed to improve their instructional practices and implemented these practices in their classroom, they saw the relationship between their professional learning and student learning.

Figure 3.1 Six Quality Indicators of High-Achieving Schools	
Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum	Curriculum is aligned with state standards and assessments in all subject areas. Curriculum is articulated clearly across all grade levels and subject areas, and at key transition points to close gaps and eliminate duplication. Curriculum provides flexibility to meet the needs of all students, including special education, gifted and talented, culturally and linguistically diverse, and economically disadvantaged students. A process is in place for monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the curriculum. Textbooks and other materials are sufficient for use in delivering curriculum in all content areas.
Effective Instruction	Teachers are evaluated (both formally and informally) and provided with regular feedback. Teachers are provided with professional development that is relevant to their needs, based in classroom practice, and reinforced through ongoing support. Instruction is based on curriculum aligned to state standards, and frequent benchmark assessments are used to monitor student performance. Activities and assignments (including homework) are engaging, relevant to the content, and reinforce or extend the objective of each lesson. Additional assistance is provided for low-performing students in the classroom and/or through out-of-classroom or afterschool programs.
Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data	Assessment of student learning is frequent and aligned with state standards and district curriculum. A comprehensive school-level accountability and data management system is in place. Student progress data are reported frequently and regularly to students and parents. Teachers make instructional decisions based on student performance data.
Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement	High expectations for academic achievement for all students are evident throughout the school environment. The school environment is driven by a clear plan for school safety and codes of conduct for staff and students. Discipline plans and procedures reflect equity and a respect for diversity in all areas. The physical environment is clean and orderly. Support is provided for students at key transition points—PK through kindergarten, elementary through middle school, and middle school through high school.
Effective School Leadership	A shared vision and mission are evident throughout the school. Decision making that is focused on the school vision and mission is shared with teachers, staff, and the community. The principal ensures an equitable, respectful, and supportive environment that is focused on promoting high achievement expectations for all students.
Family and Community Engagement	Families are invited to participate in school activities and programs. Families are informed of opportunities that may help students who struggle in school. Families and community members are invited and encouraged to participate in school improvement efforts. School personnel actively seek out community participation in school activities

Adopted from the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement: *Designing*

Effective School Improvement Strategies, June 15, 2009

Figure 3.1 Six Quality Indicators of High-Achieving Schools

However, Eaker (2002) stated that schools had to change more than the structure; the culture had to change as well. Focusing on learning rather than teaching, working collaboratively, and being accountable for results are essential in raising student achievement. When the desired results are not achieved, then the original intent of the PLC concept becomes just another movement. Fullan (2003), Marzano (2005), and Reeves (2009) found schools that exited restructuring, used data frequently. It was at this point that the researcher re-examined the AYP reports and the student achievement of each school. Based on the data, the researcher recognized that the relationship between the professional learning and student achievement, as evidenced in the AYP reports, remained minimal.

Even though all of the schools had some form of collaborative process in place for professional learning, based on the AYP reports, a student achievement gap still existed in the various subgroups meeting and exceeding the AMO target for reading/English language arts and math. At first, it appeared that all of the schools had not only made AYP, but also exceeded the AMO. However, when the data were reviewed extensively, there was a disconnection between the interventions and activities that were observed in the PLCs and the output observed in Tables 39 and 40. As revealed in the observations and interviews, the majority of conversations, meeting discussions, documentations, and artifacts surrounded various subgroups, students-at-risk, struggling students, and targeted students to increase student learning. Even though there was a slight increase from 2010 to 2011, none of the schools reported AYP data that matched the efforts of the critical elements examined in this study. This suggested to the researcher that all student data

may have been shared, but not all of the student data had been fully examined for developing improvement plans for the learning of all students. Thus, the creation of the sixth critical element of *Shared Examination of All Student Data.*

Conclusions

Huffman, Hipp, and Hord (2003) conducted a five-year mixed-methodological project entitled *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* involving 12 districts and 22 schools across five states. This project was created to assess the impact and level of progress of the implementation of critical elements of a PLC. Six of those schools showed progress while initiating, implementing, and reculturing their schools as communities of learners. These schools included one primary school, two elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and one high school. These schools consisted of a diverse population of students in rural, suburban, and urban settings, including students who were economically disadvantaged (qualified for free and reduced lunch).

From Huffman, Hipp, and Hord's (2003) research, they were able to ascertain the following findings: principal leadership was key; creating and sustaining a shared vision was not modeled effectively; collective learning and shared personal practice was difficult to separate and that collective learning provided access to sharing personal practice; therefore, making it a cyclical process; supportive conditions (relational and structural) was the glue of the PLCs; and schools neglected to operate to enhance student achievement. According to Huffman, Hipp, and Hord, these schools validated practices that promoted and hindered school improvement efforts.

For this study, the researcher adopted the research design and survey instrument, *PLCA-R* of Olivier et al. (2009) to assist in the examination of the implementation of critical elements of a PLC in six selected high-performing and low-performing middle schools in Georgia. These schools also consisted of a diverse population of students in rural and urban settings, and included students who were economically disadvantaged (qualified for free and reduced lunch).

Initially, the researcher was under the assumption that differences would be found in the implementation of critical elements of high-performing and low-performing middle schools. This assumption was based on the fact that the low-performing schools had not made AYP for three or more consecutive years or was in Needs Improvement (NI) status. This assumption was also based on the contrast of the schools' performance level being identified as high and low because of their AYP status of meeting the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO).

However, as evident in the study, because no differences were found in the implementation of the critical elements in the high-performing and low-performing middle schools, the researcher can first conclude that the schools were basically operating the same in the implementation of PLCs. The criterion for schools being high-performing in this study was that they had to have made AYP consecutively for three or more years. Yet, according to the data when comparing this criterion to the six quality indicators of high-achieving schools as outlined in Figure 3.1, the high-performing schools in this study still had some work to do in the full implementation of the critical elements.

Furthermore, because there were no differences in the low-performing middle schools, they too had work to do in the full implementation of the critical elements.

Therefore, the researcher can conclude in order for schools to be truly identified as high-achieving schools that the full implementation of Shared and Supportive Leadership and Shared Values and Vision must include a vision and mission that is evident throughout the school, with leadership sharing and ensuring equity and respect as it relates to high expectations for all students.

Furthermore, the researcher can conclude in order for schools to be truly identified as high-achieving schools that the full implementation of Collaborative Learning and Application and Shared Personal Practices must include: frequent examination of assessment data of student learning, rigorous alignment of state and district curriculum, and accountable and manageable data at all levels within the school. Teachers and administrators must share the vision of making instructional decisions based on student performance data, must conduct professional development that is relevant to the needs of the students, and must report and review student progress data frequently to students and parents.

Finally, the researcher can conclude in order for schools to be truly identified as high-achieving schools that the full implementation of Supportive Conditions must include: promotion of consistent shared decision-making, uninterrupted collaborative planning and communication, and sharing of personal practices.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine high-performing and low-performing

middle schools who have implemented the five critical elements of a PLC. Although there were no significant differences found from the quantitative data, there were patterns found in the implementation of critical elements of PLCs in high-performing middle schools and low-performing middle schools from the qualitative data. The patterns were not only found in the implementation of critical elements of PLCs, but also found in the progress of student achievement. From the observations and interviews, even though the data reflected that all schools had implemented PLCs and the five critical elements, as indicated in Table 39, the 2011 CRCT results imply that there must be other factors for students not achieving in the six high-and low-performing middle schools.

The implications are clear; all personnel of schools, including administrators must take ownership of all students' learning, must be aware of all teachers' instructional practices, must understand what professional learning is needed to improve student learning, and must not be pre-occupied with other tasks and goals for school. All personnel must be able to have various means and structures of communication allowing them to converse effectively and consistently across content and grade levels. All personnel must be able to make decisions, take risks, and have the support of trust and respect from all of their peers, as well as administrators as it relates to student learning and achievement.

Finally, the implication is clear as it relates to student achievement, that PLCs must include the sharing and examining of all data (instructional practices, observations and feedback, assessments, and student work) for all students by all personnel at all levels. The six schools may have met the obligation of meeting the state's AMO

standards for AYP in various areas, but they did not meet the obligation of providing support for all students to achieve. Bernhardt (2009) reminded educators that they must not forget the vision; student achievement occurs when all the data are looked at carefully and when sharing and learning takes place.

Dessoff (2011) wrote how Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, and Texas Public School Districts implemented a common objective to help students achieve. This common objective involved better ways to use information to propel student achievement. This common objective involved new ways to manage and use data. This common objective involved staff having to make small decisions to teach individual students effectively. This common objective involved focusing on the right data of the individual student and establishing a learning profile according to the characteristics of the individual student. This common objective involved implementing data warehouses, data dashboards, and electronic tools for storing, viewing, and analyzing data. Dessoff reported that Maryland Public School District's student performance on assessment 2009-10 results from reading and math were at the highest level ever. According to Dessoff, city and state officials said it was due to district reforms, which provided greater autonomy over resources and more accountability for student achievement in schools. These data-driven decisions support the researcher's position of adding the sixth critical element, *Shared Examination of All Student Data* to PLCs.

From the 30 years of experience as a teacher, a principal, an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent—working in large districts and small, Burkett (2006), stated that there were six things that he learned when trying to improve schools.

1. Make sure that every person in the school sees himself or herself as a leader, and not depend solely on the principal.

2. Make sure that there is a mentoring and nurturing process in place for teachers.

3. Help teachers make the transition from content to lesson, using data to shape instruction.

4. Have multiple checkpoints along the way.

5. Choose the focus and stick to it. The smarter strategic plans have 3-4 goals.

6. Have a process in place for accountability for everyone who is involved with student achievement.

From the 15 years of experience as teacher, teacher support specialist, team leader, assistant principal, and academic coach, the researcher has also found this to be true. The researcher found when teachers were nurtured, assisted and supported in teaching and learning, and held accountable for results, student achievement took place. The researcher also found that constant monitoring of instruction and data increased student achievement. Therefore, the researcher suggests that the participants of these six schools as well as across the nation develop a Collins-like framework (see Figure 4.1). This framework starts with revisiting the PLC critical element, shared values and vision, conducting a root-cause analysis of all data, looking beyond CRCT scores, and focusing on going from *good* (making AYP) to *great* (exceeding AYP) in student achievement.

The Hedgehog Concept

The essence of the Hedgehog Concept is to help an organization obtain **piercing clarity** about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercising the relentless discipline to say "No, thank you" to opportunities that fail the hedgehog test.

Jim Collins, *Good to Great*

What we are **deeply passionate** about

What we can be the **best** at

What drives our **resource engine**

Where your true mission and programs should be.

Figure 4:1 The Hedgehog Concept

Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to examine real-life implementation of the five critical elements: Shared and Supportive Leadership, Shared Values and Vision, Collective Learning and Application, Shared Personal Practice, and Supportive Conditions (relational and structural) of a PLC in three high-performing and three low-performing middle schools in Georgia. Specifically, in this study, the patterns and differences of these critical elements amongst the schools were described. The recommendations are:

1. Future administration of the PLCA-R survey instrument should include a sixth critical element of PLCs, which measures a close examination of all student data and not just the subgroups reported on the AYP reports.

2. Future administration of the PLCA-R survey instrument should include items for leadership accountability and having access to multiple types of assessments.

3. Future studies should examine all data: individual students; the mission, belief,

and vision statements of schools; SIPs; the focus of the PLCs; Response to
Intervention (RTI); the extended learning time (ELT); selection processes for
staff; and monitoring and accountability processes for transfer of professional
learning to instruction, to facilitate increased achievement for all students to
exceed.

4. A replication of this study should be conducted at other middle schools with
    comparable demographics and where those schools have made AYP for three
    consecutive years or more with more students in the exceeding category for the
    AMO, utilizing the PLCA-R including the sixth critical element and new survey
    items.

5. A replication of this study should be conducted at the elementary and high school
    level utilizing the PLCA-R including the sixth critical element and new survey
    items.

Dissemination

The researcher provided the principals of each of the six middle schools an
abstract of this study and detailed findings for their individual school. Throughout the
study, the researcher discussed the findings with two of the six principals and as a result,
they incorporated the findings within their school improvement plan to enhance or
maintain the implementation of critical elements in the PLCs. The researcher hopes all
school districts use this study as a reference for continuous improvement of PLCs to
promote student learning. In addition, a copy of this study has been provided to Olivier,
Hipp, and Huffman (2009), owners of the PLCA-R, at Olivier's request.

This research involved a close examination of the implementation of professional learning communities to determine if there were any differences in implementation between middle schools that are identified as high performing and those identified as low performing, and if so, what were the differences and how did they impact student achievement. This mixed method study, which included both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, will be published and presented by the researcher to promote a culture of data-driven decision making and professional learning to support student achievement and school improvement in school districts throughout the nation.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

ASSESSMENT – REVISED (PLCA-R)

Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised

Directions:
This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices which occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement. Comments after each dimension section are optional.

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

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

STATEMENTS	SCALE			
Shared and Supportive Leadership	SD	D	A	SA
1. Staff members are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.	0	0	0	0
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.	0	0	0	0
3. Staff members have accessibility to key information.	0	0	0	0
4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	0	0	0
5. Opportunities are provided for staff members to initiate change.	0	0	0	0
6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	0	0	0	0
7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	0	0	0	0
8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.	0	0	0	0
9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	0	0	0	0
10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	0	0	0	0

11.	Staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

STATEMENTS		**SCALE**			
	Shared Values and Vision	SD	D	A	SA
12.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	0	0	0	0
13.	Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
14.	Staff members share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	0	0	0	0
15.	Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.	0	0	0	0
16.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	0	0	0
17.	School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	0	0	0	0
18.	Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.	0	0	0	0
19.	Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	0	0	0	0

19.	Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	0	0	0	0
20.	Data are used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision.	0	0	0	0

COMMENTS:

STATEMENTS		**SCALE**			
	Collective Learning and Application	**SD**	**D**	**A**	**SA**
21.	Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	0	0	0	0
22.	Collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	0	0	0
23.	Staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	0	0	0
24.	A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	0	0	0
25.	Staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	0	0	0
26.	Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0

27.	School staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	0	0	0	0
28.	School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	0	0	0
29.	Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
30.	Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0

COMMENTS:				

STATEMENTS	**SCALE**			
Shared Personal Practice	SD	D	A	SA
31. Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.	0	0	0	0
32. Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
33. Staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	0	0	0
34. Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
35. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	0	0	0	0

36.	Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	0	0	0
37.	Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

STATEMENTS		SCALE			
	Supportive Conditions – Relationships	SD	D	A	SA
38.	Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	0	0	0
39.	A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	0	0	0	0
40.	Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	0	0	0
41.	School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	0	0	0	0
42.	Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

STATEMENTS		SCALE			
	Supportive Conditions – Structures	SD	D	A	SA

43.	Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	0	0	0	0
44.	The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	0	0	0	0
45.	Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	0	0	0	0
46.	Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	0	0	0	0
47.	Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	0	0	0	0
48.	The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	0	0
49.	The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	0	0	0
50.	Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members.	0	0	0	0
51.	Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	0	0	0	0
52.	Data are organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2010, in press). Assessing and analyzing schools. In K. K. Hipp & J. B. Huffman (Eds.). *Demystifying professional learning communities: Leadership at its Best.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Date

Superintendent or Principal
Address of School District

Greetings:

My name is Damita Griffin Bynes and I am a Doctoral candidate at Georgia Southern University (GSU) in Statesboro, Georgia.

There is much attention and many resources being dedicated to turn all middle schools into high-performing schools that promote student achievement. The purpose of this research is to focus on six middle schools in Georgia, where the five critical elements of a professional learning community: Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and Application, Supportive Conditions (structural and relational), and Shared Personal Practices have been implemented. Of the six middle schools, three schools have been selected because they have made AYP for three consecutive years or more and are recognized as high-performing middle schools. Simultaneously, three middle schools have been selected because they have yet to meet all of the criteria of a high-performing school or have not made AYP for three consecutive years, and are labeled as low-performing. I want to examine real-life implementations of critical elements of a professional learning community in these high-performing and low-performing middle schools to determine if there are differences and/or patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools.
The criterion that I have selected for conducting research is based on the school having implemented the professional learning community concept and having made or not made AYP for three consecutive years. Your middle school has been identified and recommended by your local RESA as a school that meets these criteria. This research will be conducted in two parts.

First, I am requesting that all certified staff complete the Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman's (2009) 4-pt Likert scale entitled a *Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised (PLCA-R)*. This survey instrument will serve as the quantitative instrument and is to be completed prior to my visit.

Second, I would like to observe, interview, and review any artifacts. This process will take place during a two consecutive days site visit. During the site visit, I will spend one day interviewing four focus groups from each of the three grade levels and exploratory (connections). The second day will include observations of each of the professional learning community meetings for each of the three grade levels and exploratory (connections) during their regularly-scheduled time. This method will serve as the qualitative process. To protect the rights and ensure anonymity, all participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of GSU.

Thank you in advance for your consent and I am looking forward to scheduling a time to meet with you. I can be reached at 478-625-1867 (h), 478-494-2162 (c), or at db01034@georgiasouthern.edu.

Damita Griffin Bynes
Doctoral Candidate
Georgia Southern University

APPENDIX C

IRB PLAN APPROVAL

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Phone: 912-478-0843   Veazey Hall 2024
P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-478-0719   IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu   Statesboro, GA 30460

To:	Damita Griffin Bynes db01023@georgiasouthern.edu
CC:	Charles E. Patterson
	Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College
From:	Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
	Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
	(IACUC/IBC/IRB)
Date:	March 1, 2010
Expiration Date:	April 30, 2010 *Remember, all renewals must be reviewed and approved prior to this date for you to receive a renewal. The IRB meets on the fourth week of each month. Application submitted too close to the expiration date may not be approved for renewal.*
Original Approval Date:	December 15, 2010
Subject:	Notice of Expiration for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

Your research project numbered **H11170** and titled **"The Examination of Real-Life Implementations of Critical Elements on a Professional Learning Community for High-Preforming Middle Schools and Low-Performing Middle Schools"** approved for up to 250 subjects will expire on **April 30, 2010**.

Final - Each research protocol may be renewed for up to 3 years from original approval date. No approval period may exceed 12 months. Your project has received all available renewals. If you intend to continue this project you may resubmit the project to the IRB for approval. No additional data collection or analysis may occur past your expiration date.

Extensions 1 or 2 - If there have been no changes to your research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for up to an additional 12 months in this period by completing the Extension form. IRB approvals may be extended as necessary to complete data collection and analysis for a total of up to 36 months over a 3 year period. Your project extension request must be submitted a minimum of 10 business days prior to expiration. No data collection or analysis may occur past your expiration date without extension approval. If you wish to continue the project after 3 years you must reapply to the IRB as a new project.

If you would like to continue the project with minor changes to the project you may submit those changes on an Amendment form to accompany the extension form.

If you have completed this project, please send a project Termination form. The university will keep your proposal on file at Archives and Records Management. You may not collect any more data on this project past your expiration date without requesting a renewal. **Please note that all projects must be formally closed with the Institutional Review Board.**

The IRB forms are available at the following website:

http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/research/forms_compliance.html

       Please contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs Compliance office at (912) 478-0843 if you have any questions.

       Sincerely,

Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer (1.11.11)

APPENDIX D

LETTER GRANTING PERMISSION TO USE PLCA-R

**Department of Educational Foundations
and Leadership**

P.O. Box 43091
Lafayette, LA 70504-3091
337-482-6680
Fax: 337-482-5262

Universite' des Acadiens

March 25, 2010

Damita Griffin Bynes
Academic Math/SPED Facilitator
Jenkins County School District
Doctoral Candidate, Georgia Southern University

Dear Ms. Bynes,

This correspondence is for the purpose of acknowledging permission to utilize the *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)* in your research for your doctoral dissertation study at Georgia Southern University.

As first author of the measure, I would like to express our pleasure that this instrument will be able to contribute to your research. I am very interested in hearing about your study findings and would be pleased to receive an electronic copy of your final dissertation study.

I am attaching a copy of the measure for your use. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your inquiry and interest.

Sincerely,

Dianne F. Olivier

Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor
Educational Foundations and Leadership
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
P. O. Box 43091
Lafayette, LA   70504-3091

APPENDIX E

COVER LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Date

Greetings:

My name is Damita Griffin Bynes and I am a Doctoral candidate at Georgia Southern University (GSU) in Statesboro, Georgia. I would like to formally thank you and your colleagues for consenting to participate in this research. It is understood that you don't have to participate in this research. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study.

There is much attention and many resources being dedicated to turn all middle schools into high-performing schools that promote student achievement. The purpose of this research is to focus on six middle schools in Georgia, where the five critical elements of a professional learning community: Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and Application, Supportive Conditions (structural and relational), and Shared Personal Practices have been implemented. Of the six middle schools, three schools have been selected because they have made AYP for three consecutive years or more and are recognized as high-performing middle schools. Simultaneously, three middle schools have been selected because they have yet to meet all of the criteria of a high-performing school or have not made AYP for three consecutive years, and are labeled as low-performing. The researcher wants to examine real-life implementations of critical elements of a professional learning community in these high-performing and low-performing middle schools to determine if there are differences and/or patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools.

This research will be conducted in two parts. First, I have attached a copy of the Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman's (2009) 4-pt Likert scale entitled a *Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised (PLCA-R),* a scantron, and directions for completing the scantron. This survey instrument will serve as the quantitative instrument and is to be completed prior to my visit. This survey will require 15 to 30 minutes of your time. Once you have completed the survey, it is to be returned to *insert name of designee* by *insert date here.*

Second, I would like to observe, interview, and review any artifacts that would provide real-life strengths of a school utilizing professional learning communities. This process will take place during a two consecutive days site visit. During the site visit, the researcher will spend one day interviewing focus groups of 5-8 participants from each grade level, exploratory (connections), and other school personnel for 30 to 45 minutes. These focus-group interviews will be audio-taped. The second day will include observations of each of the professional learning community meetings for each of the three grade levels and exploratory (connections) during their regularly-scheduled time.

To protect your rights and ensure anonymity, all participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of GSU. In addition two security envelopes will be provided for you. One envelope will be for securing the survey

and scantron. The second envelope will be for securing the signed informed consent form once you have completed the survey. Pseudonyms will be pre-assigned and used for the names of the middle schools and interviewees when it is time to report the findings. At the completion of the study, a copy of the results for your school will be provided to your principal.

Thank you in advance for your participation and I am looking forward to working with you. Should you have any questions, I can be reached at 478-625-1867 (h), 478-494-2162 (c), or at db01034@georgiasouthern.edu.

Damita Griffin Bynes
Doctoral Candidate
Georgia Southern University

APPENDIX F

IRB INFORMED CONSENT FORM

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION - Graduate Research

DEPARTMENT OF Leadership, Technology, and Human Development

INFORMED CONSENT

1. The purpose of this research is to focus on six middle schools in Georgia, where the five critical elements of a professional learning community: Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision, Shared and Supportive Leadership, Collective Learning and Application, Supportive Conditions (structural and relational), and Shared Personal Practices have been implemented. Of the six middle schools, three schools have been selected because they have made AYP for three consecutive years or more and are recognized as high-performing middle schools. Simultaneously, three middle schools have been selected because they have yet to meet all of the criteria of a high-performing school or have not made AYP for three consecutive years, and are labeled as low-performing. The researcher wants to examine real-life implementations of critical elements of a professional learning community in these high-performing and low-performing middle schools to determine if there are differences and/or patterns that exist among or between the two groups of schools.

2. <u>Participation in this research will include certified staff for the survey. The principal and assistant principal, counselor, grade-level chairs, leadership team members, graduation or instructional coach (if applicable), and other classroom teachers will be invited to participate in the focus group interviews.</u>

3. I understand that the following risks may occur: not being familiar with the researcher or answering questions in a focus group setting. Another risk factor that could result is that the researcher provided a copy of the interview questions to some of the principals prior to the actual study. If these questions were shared with any of the participants, prepared responses may occur; thereby possibly skewing the data.

3. This researcher hopes to gain insight of low-performing and high performing middle schools in which these critical elements have been implemented. Because of this study, the researcher hopes to fill the gap in literature of not having enough models of real-life implementation of critical elements of a professional learning community in both high performing and low-performing middle schools that promote student achievement. The researcher hopes that the results of this study will benefit the participants in the following manner: receiving a copy of the study and an abstract of the findings for their individual school, gaining knowledge to enhance or maintain full implementation of critical elements in their PLCs, and improving the design and delivery of instruction that promotes student learning.

4. Duration/Time required from the participants will include completion of a 52 items, 4-point Likert type survey (15 to 30 minutes) prior to the two-day site visit. During the site visit, the researcher will spend one day interviewing focus groups of 5-8 participants from each grade level, exploratory (connections), and other school personnel for 30 to 45 minutes. These focus-

group interviews will be audio-taped. Once all of the transcripts have been transcribed, the researcher will create a summary of each of the focus group interviews gleaned according to the five critical elements. This summary will be used in a face-to-face meeting with the designated person from each of the focus group sessions to validate the accuracy of information captured. This process is necessary to determine if there are any corrections or additions to be made. Once this task has been completed, the researcher will retrieve the summary and use them to begin to develop themes, interpretations, and summarizations.

5. The second day will include observations of each of the professional learning community meetings for each of the three grade levels and exploratory (connections) during their regularly-scheduled time.

4. Statement of Confidentiality. The researcher, the peer debriefer, each of the focus groups' designees, the researcher's chair (faculty advisor), and the researcher's methodologist are the only persons who will have access to the data from the surveys, interviews, observations, and artifacts. It will be maintained on a secured database and computer. Pseudonyms will be pre-assigned and used for the names of the middle schools and interviewees when it is time to report the findings. The data will be maintained in this secured location for a minimum of 3 years following completion of the study. (May 2014).

6. All participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

5. It is understood that you don't have to participate in this research. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study.

7. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

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

Title of Project: ***The Examination of Real-Life Implementations of Critical Elements in a Professional Learning Community for High-Performing and Low-Performing Middle Schools***

Principal Investigator: (Damita Griffin Bynes, 5202 Friendship Church Rd, Bartow, GA 30413, 474-494-2162 (cell) or 478-625-1867 (home), db01034@georgiasouthern.edu)
Faculty Advisor: (Dr. Deborah M. Thomas, GSU - COE, 912-478-5325, debthom@georgiasouthern.edu)

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

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

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW AGENDA

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION - Graduate Research

DEPARTMENT OF Leadership, Technology, and Human Development

Interview Agenda

1) Researcher introduces herself to the Focus Group Interviewees

2) Researcher provides Purpose of the Interview

3) Researcher provides Focus Group Interviewees a copy of the Interview Questions

4) Researcher receives Participants' signed Informed Consent Form

5) Researcher Conducts Interview

6) Researcher Confirms Designated Interviewee's email id to provide a summary of interview

7) Researcher Thanks Focus Group Interviewees

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION - Graduate Research

DEPARTMENT OF Leadership, Technology, and Human Development

Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision	Shared and Supportive Leadership	Collective Learning and Application	Supportive Conditions	Shared Personal Practices
How are the mission, belief and values of the school developed?	How are personnel chosen for leadership positions?	How does curriculum design and implementation occur? Who participates?	Describe what takes place during your planning period.	Tell me about a time when you've felt that your teaching practices have been supported.
Describe a typical professional learning community (PLC) meeting.	Describe a time when you've had the opportunity to make a decision for the school.	How do teachers plan for Instruction?	Give an example when you've taken a risk to make changes in the school?	Can you recall a specific time when you've been given feedback from another colleague?
What school personnel are expected to attend the PLC meetings?	How often do the principal and/or assistant principal attend PLC meetings?	Who determines what should be taught?	Name the type of resources that you have access to in this school.	Can you recall a specific time when you've given feedback to another colleague?
Describe how professional learning takes place in this school.	Explain how staff are empowered to make decisions.	Provide an example of how data are used in this school.	How is a culture of trust developed in this school?	Provide an example of how your professional learning impacts your teaching practices and student learning.
		Explain the process for creating assessments.	Describe a time when you felt included in the PLC.	

Table 1

Variables, Quantitative Research Sub-Questions

Variable Name	Research Question	Items on Survey
Shared and Supportive Leadership	Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	See Questions 1 – 11.
Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision	Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared beliefs, values, and vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	See Questions 12- 20.
Collective Learning and Application	Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	See Questions 21 - 30.
Shared Personal Practices	Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	See Questions 31 - 37.
Supportive Conditions (Relational and Structural)	Are school personnel's perceptions of the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	See Questions 38 - 52.

Table 2

Variables, Qualitative Research Sub-Questions

Variable Name	Research Question	Data Collection Themes
Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision	Is the implementation of shared beliefs, values, and vision of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities; Protocols and Norms; Various Types of Professional Development
Shared and Supportive Leadership	Is the implementation of shared and supportive leadership models of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	Access to Multiple Sources of Data; Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities; Leadership Support; Various Modes of Communications; Leadership Accountability
Collective Learning and Its Application	Is the implementation of student learning initiatives in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	Access to Multiple Sources of Data; Protocols and Norms; Various Types of Professional Development; Various Modes of Communications
Shared Personal Practices	Is the implementation of shared personal practices of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	Access to Multiple Sources of Data; Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities; Protocols and Norms; Various Types of Professional Development; Various Modes of Communications
Supportive Conditions (Relational and Structural)	Is the implementation of supportive conditions of a professional learning community in a high-performing middle school and a low-performing middle school different? If so, how?	Access to Multiple Resources; Culture of Trust, Risk-Taking, and Input Opportunities; Protocols and Norms; Various Types of Professional Development; Various Modes of Communications; Various Types of Assessments