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Exploring Principal Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools

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EXPLORING PRINCIPAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHER LEARNING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARING COMMUNITIES IN TORCHBEARER SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case study explored principals support for teacher learning through Professional Learning Communities (PLC)s in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. In the last two decades the PLC model for school improvement has been implemented in K-12 schools with the primary goal of improving student achievement. There is limited research to show how principals support teacher learning in PLCs. My study helped to provide principals and teachers insight into how principals support teacher learning in PLCs. The study was conducted in three Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. Each school had implemented PLCs for a minimum of one year. The participants included principals and teachers involved in PLCs. Data analysis were conducted within each individual case and across the three cases. Five themes emerged from the cross-case analysis: (a) *communication*, (b) *school culture*, (c) *personal gains*, (d) *purpose and implementation*, and (e) *structure and organization*. The five themes presented a description of how principals support teacher learning in PLCs in Torchbearer Schools. This qualitative study may provide principals and teachers a better understanding of how principals support teachers learning in PLCs.

Keywords: professional learning communities, Torchbearer Schools, andragogy

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wife Shelley and my children Landon, Evey and Ella Kate. It is also dedicated to my family and friends who work in education to make a difference in the life of a child.

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I first acknowledge my Jesus Christ, Philippians 4:13. I also thank my wonderful wife Shelley for always supporting me and my children Landon, Evey and Ella Kate for making life fun! I want to thank my family and friends for encouraging words and inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model for school improvement has been implemented in K-12 schools with the primary goal of improving student achievement. However, there are components to PLCs that increase the prospect of success in achieving this goal (DuFour, 2005; Lumpe, 2007; Nelson, LeBard, & Waters, 2010; Thessin & Starr, 2011). One component that contributes to the success of PLCs is supporting teacher learning that results in improved instruction and student achievement (Eaker & Keating, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Principals are encountering increased pressure to design and contribute to high quality teacher professional development that impacts student learning (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010; Hord & Hirsh, 2009; Terehoff, 2002). School leaders are expected to help teachers "develop insight, knowledge, and skills needed to become more effective classroom and school leaders and to demonstrate increases in student learning" (Terehoff, 2002, p. 65).

Principals and teachers working with at-risk students have additional challenges of meeting the needs of all students while providing a productive learning environment to all stakeholders (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Tilley, Smith, & Claxton, 2012). Principals and teachers in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama demonstrate the ability to lead their students to excellence in student achievement. Torchbearer Schools are defined as at-risk schools with 80% or more of the student population living in poverty (Alabama State Department of Education, 2013).

Additionally, for Torchbearer School status to be granted, 80% of the students must score Level III or Level IV on the Alabama Reading and Math state test (Alabama State Department of Education, 2013). Principal involvement is critical to effective teacher learning and to improving student achievement for students attending Torchbearer Schools. Principals must create opportunities for adult learning by providing teachers with rich resources "to build a foundation of knowledge about content areas sufficient for them to feel confident about taking responsibility for planning and carrying out their own learning projects" (Knowles, 1989, p. 81).

Research Problem

As the expectation for high levels of accountability increases in education, schools are moving towards implementing PLCs to foster collaborative data analysis and to support teachers in improving instructional practice and increasing student learning (Thessin & Starr, 2011). Researchers have noted the importance of moving from workshop-based professional development to more effective environments for adult learning such as PLCs, in order to improve classroom instruction (DuFour, 2005; Lumpe, 2007; Nelson, et al., 2010). PLCs provide teachers the opportunities to collaborate and learn together within a community of peers. According to DuFour (2005), teachers participating in PLCs work interdependently to achieve common goals and influence their classroom practice in ways that will improve student achievement. Through PLCs, teachers can share and discuss ideas that can help evaluate current practices and in many cases lead to new and more effective classroom practices (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012). A major element of effective PLCs is for teachers to focus on analyzing student work in order to understand student learning and adapt instruction to meet student

learning needs (Nelson et al., 2010). However, there are challenges that must be addressed such as time constraints, teacher isolation, differing teacher viewpoints, and teacher conflict that exist in implementing PLCs (Lujan & Day, 2010). Additionally, in the PLC model teachers must be willing to question their own teaching, seek outside expertise, and reflect on their own teaching practices (Wood, 2007). Exploring how principals support teacher learning in PLCs may help educators understand how principals behave in the context of PLCs in Torchbearer Schools.

Findings from research have focused on at-risk students living in poverty and achieving high levels of academic success despite their background or socioeconomic situations (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Tilley et al., 2012). According to Kannapel & Clements (2005), there are a limited number of schools that met the criteria of high-performing and high-poverty available for research. Furthermore, principals that lead high-performing, high-poverty schools are supportive educators that truly care about the community and students they serve (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Further research is needed to explore how principals support teacher learning at high-performing schools and how they educate at-risk students.

Although the focus of several studies has explored the effectiveness of PLCs in different areas of education, there have been only a few studies conducted regarding principal support of teacher learning through participation in PLCs (DuFour, 2005; Lumpe, 2007; Nelson et al., 2010; Thessin & Starr, 2011; Sayers, Gurley, Fifolt, & Collins, 2014; Wood, 2007). Further research is needed to explore principal support of teacher learning by interviewing principals and teachers who are participating in PLCs to understand their perceptions of how PLCs affect the professional development of

teachers and how PLCs may affect instruction. These insights may help teachers and administrators improve teacher teamwork and teacher learning as well as increase student performance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore principal support for teacher learning in the context of implementing the PLC model of school improvement in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. I have explored principal and teacher perceptions of principal behaviors that were perceived to support teacher learning.

Research Questions

In this study I sought to address the following central research question: How do principals in selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama support teacher learning for teachers who participate in PLCs?

Sub-questions. The following sub-questions were used to complement the central research question (Creswell, 2012):

1. How do principals in Torchbearer schools identify learning goals in PLCs?
2. What are the essential structures of PLCs that foster teacher learning at selected school sites?
3. What opportunities for feedback do principals provide for teachers in a PLC?

4. How do principals determine that what teachers have learned in PLCs has an effect on classroom instruction?

Theoretical Framework

Knowles' theory of adult learning, or *Andragogy*, served as the main theoretical framework guiding this study (Knowles, 1968). I sought to understand how principals support the learning of adult teachers in Torchbearer Schools. Terehoff (2002) wrote, "Knowing how adults learn can guide a principal in improving the process of school-based teacher professional development and making such activities more effective" (p. 76). Therefore, my study was framed around the idea of how adults learn in the context of PLCs operating in select Torchbearer Schools in Alabama.

Additionally, I drew upon the theory of Organizational Learning to frame my exploration and understanding of how adults learn within the context of their surroundings. Organizational learning is defined as "the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience" (Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1995, p. 73). These two theories, adult learning and organizational learning, served as theoretical foundations for my understanding of the phenomena I studied and provided a foundation upon which the data collected in the multiple case study were interpreted.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made concerning the data collection process:

1. It was assumed that all participants would be trustworthy in their answers to questions.
2. It was assumed that the schools selected for case study analysis supported the PLC model for school improvement.
3. It was assumed the principals and teachers would be willing participants in the study.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations existed in this study:

1. The PLC model for school improvement functioned at different levels of implementation among the selected participant schools.
2. As a school principal, I have extensive training on implementing and sustaining PLCs. My biases may have impacted the interpretation of the data.
3. The principals serving in the selected schools may not have been active members of the PLCs operating in their schools.

Significance of the Study

The review of the literature revealed that several research studies have focused on PLCs increasing student achievement (DuFour, 2005; Lumpe, 2007; Nelson, et al., 2010; Thessin & Starr, 2011). However, there are a limited number of studies that focus on how teachers learn in PLCs (Sayers, et al., 2014). This study may inform educators about how principals support teacher learning in PLCs. Furthermore, this study may find its significance in the exploration and deeper understanding of teacher and principal insight into principal support for teacher learning.

Definition of Terms

Andragogy. The concept of an integrated framework of adult learning (Knowles, 1980).

Bracketing. "The researcher is aware of personal biases, assumptions, and feelings, however the researcher brackets them, puts them aside, in order to be open and receptive to what he is attempting to understand" (Hatch, 2002, p. 86).

Professional Learning Communities. A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Torchbearer Schools: Torchbearer status is defined as (a) high-poverty, with 80% of students receiving free/reduced lunches; (b) high-performing, with 80% of students scoring Level III or Level IV on the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test; and (c) are public schools in Alabama (Alabama State Department of Education, 2013).

Organization of the Study

This study consisted of five chapters. Chapter One, the introduction, focused on the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, assumptions, limitations of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, and organization of the study. Chapter Two, the review of the literature, presented the theoretical frameworks including adult learning theory and organizational learning. Chapter Two also included a description of the conceptual frameworks adopted for this

study, PLCs, and the 21st century learner. Chapter Three described the methodology including the design of qualitative inquiry, sampling, data collection, establishing credibility, ethical considerations, and the role of the researcher. In Chapter Four, I presented the case analysis and research findings. In Chapter Five I discussed the summary of the study, a summary of research findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Summary

In Chapter One, the research problem, purpose of the proposed multiple case study, and research questions were introduced. The theoretical frameworks of adult learning theory and organizational learning served as the theoretical bases for this study. Exploring principal support for teacher learning in the context of implementing the PLC model of school improvement in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama provided insight into teacher and principal perceptions about what behaviors principals exhibit that support teacher learning and that impact classroom instruction.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To help young people learn the complex and analytical skills they need for the 21st century, teachers must learn to teach in ways that develop higher-order thinking and performance (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). In order for principals to support teachers in this mission of sophisticated teaching, principals must provide effective professional learning for teachers. Andragogy and organizational learning are theories related to adult learning that provide school principals a foundation to support teacher learning (Knowles, 1968; Merriam, 2001; Nevis et al., 1995; Taylor, 2009). PLCs are a model principals can use for professional development that provides opportunities for teacher learning (DuFour, 2005). These theoretical and conceptual frameworks provide principals with foundational understanding of how to support teacher learning in PLCs.

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant theories of adult learning and organizational learning as applied to the school setting to provide a theoretical basis for inquiry. Next, I reviewed the conceptual framework of PLCs in order to explore how PLCs may influence the process of adult learning in schools. I reviewed pertinent literature relative to 21st century learners in order to provide a context for how the learning needs of contemporary students must be addressed. Finally, I reviewed research related to Torchbearer schools, at-risk high-poverty schools and how PLCs support high levels of student achievement. Table 1 provides a literature review outline.

Table 1

Literature Review Outline

Frameworks	Literature Review
Adult Learning Theory	Knowles: Andragogy Mezirow: Learning as Transformation Taylor: Andragogy's Transition Into the Future
Organizational Learning	Azmi: Organizational Learning Isaacs: Collective Thinking Senge: Learning Organization Hoy: Healthy Organizations for Learning
Professional Learning Communities	Dufour and Eaker: PLC at Work Nelson, LeBard & Waters: How to Create a PLC
21st Century Learner	Pearlman: 21st Century Schools Greenhill: 21st Century Educators

Theoretical Frameworks

Andragogy is defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Andragogy is the theory of adult learning that sets out the fundamental principles and characteristics of the adult learners or, in the context of this study, teachers, in planning, realizing, evaluating, and correcting adult learning (Knowles, 1968; Zmeyov, 1998). Knowles (1968) coined the term "andragogy" and popularized it within the educational community. Taylor (2009) stated, "Knowles summarized six key assumptions about adult learners, which serve as the foundation to adult learning" (p.6). According to Taylor, these assumptions are as follows:

1. *Self-concept.* As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being more self-directed. Adults tend to resist situations in which they feel that others are imposing their will on them.
2. *Experience*. As a person matures, the adult learner accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes a resource for learning. Adults tend to come into adult education with a vast amount of prior experiences compared to that of children. If those prior experiences can be used, they become the richest resource available.
3. *Readiness to learn*. As a person matures, his or her readiness to learn becomes oriented to the development of social roles. Readiness to learn is dependent on an appreciation of the relevancy of the topic to the adult learner.
4. *Orientation to learn.* As a person matures, his or her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his or her orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness. Adults are motivated to learn to the extent in which they perceive that the knowledge they are acquiring will help them perform a task or solve a problem that they may be facing in real life.
5. *Motivation to learn*. Internal motivation is of key importance as a person matures. Although adults feel the pressure of external events, they are mostly driven by internal motivation and the desire for self-esteem and goal attainment.

6. *The need to know.* Adults need to know the reason for learning something. In adult learning, the first task of the teacher is to help the learner become aware of the need to know. When adults undertake learning something they deem valuable, they will invest a considerable amount of resources. (Taylor, 2009, pp. 5-6)

Mezirow (1981) wrote that the "andragogy theory can serve as an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners" (p. 21). Andragogy is an excellent guiding theory for the study, as teachers, working together to learn how to improve their practice, are all adult learners and, presumably demonstrate some, if not all of the above-mentioned characteristics.

Andragogy also applies to educational leaders and their support of teacher learning in various ways. According to Cretchley and Castle (2001), andragogy has an influence on the views and teaching philosophy of adult educators. Andragogy contributes to the understanding of how adults learn, in what context, and explores the processes of adult learning. Moreover, andragogy is a "rallying point for separating adult education from other areas of education" (Merriam, 2001, p. 5). Additionally, Merriam (2001) noted, "Andragogy reminds educators to engage adult learners in their learning and to create conducive learning environments that help them learn their best" (p. 5). Zmeyov (1998) suggested that the principles of adult learning might be successfully applicable when learners:

1. Have a good amount of practical and social experience,

2. Are aware of a life goal and of the applicability of their knowledge and skills,
3. Have adequate background of the selected field study,
4. Are trying to attain short-term educational goals. (p. 106)

Bedi (2004) provided understanding for applying andragogy in education. Bedi (2004) stated that "andragogy helps educators understand a learner's behavior and identify causes of the learner's anxiety and encourages learners to search for options to a problem and to become self-directed learners" (p. 93). Given the current educational context, adult learners need to be actively involved in their own learning process in order to construct their own knowledge, to make sense of and effectively apply their learning (Chan, 2010).

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is defined as "the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience" (Nevis et al., 1995, p. 73). Isaacs (1993) asserted that if people learn together and are encouraged to become aware of their thought processes, they will use these assumptions and beliefs to develop a common strength and capacity for working and creating together. Similarly, Azmi (2008) stated, "nurturing learning is a top priority in today's business world because it contributes to competitive advantage through enhancing organizational performance and effectiveness" (p. 58). Therefore if members of the organization share their knowledge with other members, the organization becomes a powerful, competitive organization.

Senge (1990) noted "that the ability to learn is expected to create the major source of competitive advantage for organizations in the future, and stressing that learning itself is seen as a prerequisite for the survival of today's organizations" (p. 4). Therefore, educators must spend time learning together as an organization, not in isolation, in order to survive. Senge (1990) also wrote, "cognitive theory of organizational learning identified mental models; deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p.8). Senge (1990) discussed the "skills organizations need to acquire learning are personal mastery, building shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking" (p. 7). Principals can utilize these skills to support teachers learning together as an organization. Furthermore, adaptive learning takes place in an organization when the focus is on the foundation of existing knowledge and amending that with new knowledge to accomplish an objective (Erdem & Ucar, 2013; Senge, 1990). This type of learning is relevant to organizations and schools seeking continuous improvement.

According to Hoy (1967), the school organization is viewed as an "educational community in which members learn through interaction and experience" (p. 153). Hoy & Woolfolk (1993) stated that elementary schools that are healthy organizations for learning possess the following characteristics:

1. *Institutional integrity* is a school's ability to cope with its environment in a way that maintains the educational integrity of its programs. Teachers are protected from unreasonable community and parental demands.
2. *Principal influence* is the principal's ability to influence the actions of superiors. Being able to persuade superiors, get additional consideration, and

be unimpeded by the administrative hierarchy are necessary skills to be effective as a principal.

3. *Consideration* is principal behavior that is friendly, supportive, open, and collegial. Consideration represents a genuine concern of a principal for the welfare of teachers.
4. *Resource support* refers to a school where adequate classroom supplies and instructional materials are available and extra resources are readily supplied if requested.
5. *Morale* is a collective sense of friendliness, openness, enthusiasm, and trust among faculty members. Teachers like each other, like their jobs, and help each other, and they are proud of their school and feel a sense of accomplishment in their jobs.
6. *Academic emphasis* is the extent to which a school is driven by a quest for academic excellence. High but achievable academic goals are set for students, the learning environment is orderly and serious, teachers believe in their students' ability to achieve, and students work hard and respect those who do well academically (pp. 358-359).

Six characteristics describe an organization with a healthy environment for learning. The organizational health of a school provides a basis for organizational learning and staff development (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993).

Conceptual Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks of andragogy and organizational learning have been tested over time to provide researchers with a basis for conducting research. Theoretical

framework is broader in scope, while the conceptual framework is more specific. Conceptual frameworks of PLCs and 21st century learning guided my exploration in the research study.

Professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide educators the opportunity to "learn from each other, foster collaboration, honest talk, and a commitment to growth and development of the individual members and to the group as a whole" (Lieberman & Miller, 2011, p. 16). According to DuFour, R. P., DuFour, R., Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) schools implementing PLCs to close the achievement gap must have a shared purpose, common goals, and clear direction. Furthermore, "the PLC concept does not offer a short cut to school improvement, it does however provide a powerful, proven conceptual framework for transforming schools at all levels" (DuFour, 2007, p. 8). PLCs consist of the following elements: (a) a consistent focus on learning, (b) developing and maintaining a collaborative culture, (c) engaging in collective inquiry, (d) maintaining an action orientation, (e) committing to continuous improvement, and (f) establishing and maintaining a results orientation (DuFour et al., 2006).

According to DuFour, R. P., DuFour, R., Eaker, and Many (2006), PLCs are defined as, "Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collaborative inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve"(p. 217). Furthermore, effective PLCs must be structured as ongoing, job-embedded learning for educators to ensure sustained improvements in student learning (DuFour et al., 2006). Educator members of the PLC are expected to work collaboratively

focusing on learning. Therefore, a consistent focus on teachers learning together will affect classroom practices that can lead to student achievement (DuFour, 2007).

Ingvarson, Meiers, and Beavis (2005) studied factors affecting the impact of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice, student outcomes, and efficacy. Researchers analyzed four studies conducted by the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme from 2001 to 2003, which was to improve teachers' skills in the classroom. The purpose of the study was to report on the effects of structural and process features of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice, and efficacy. Survey data was collected from 3,250 teachers who had participated in over 80 different professional development programs. Ingvarson et al. concluded that the level of knowledge and application from the professional development increased when teachers have opportunities to talk about their personal teaching practices, evaluate student learning, develop ideas collaboratively, and support is provided for implementation of new strategies. As teacher knowledge increased, the impact on teacher practice increased, and student learning and teacher efficacy increased. Furthermore, "effective approaches engaged teachers in a process of trying new strategies, provided ongoing support and coaching when problems or issues arose and allowed teachers to discuss their practice and gain feedback about their teaching from colleagues" (Ingvarson et al., 2005, p. 16).

In a PLC, educators work collaboratively on a common purpose with a shared mission to improve teachers' learning and students' achievement (Hord & Sommers, 2008). According to DuFour (2004), "Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice; teachers in many schools continue to

work in isolation" (p. 8). Furthermore, "the powerful collaboration that characterizes PLCs is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (DuFour, 2004, p.8).

History of PLCs. Educational reform in the late 1980s in the United States, emphasizing goal setting for student achievement, had a direct impact on classroom practices for teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Spillane, 1999). Changes of this magnitude required a great deal of learning on the part of teachers, therefore creating a demand for professional development that provided support and guidance for teacher learning (Borko, 2004). During this time, schools and school districts spent millions of dollars on in-service seminars and professional development that was fragmented, not taking into account what researchers states concerning teachers learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Teachers learn in professional development must meet the needs of the individual teachers, not a one size fits all in-service.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a paradigm shift took place in professional development for teachers, moving from traditional isolation of independent teaching to collaboration and learning together as educators (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995, Rosenholtz, 1989). According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), teachers must learn to participate in professional development that involves teachers in the capacities of teaching and learning. The concept of teachers working together in teams continuously seeking and sharing learning and acting on that learning came to be called Professional Learning Communities (Hord, 1997). Furthermore, PLC model for professional development provided educators a transition from isolated learning to

collaboratively working together to share knowledge, ideas, and best practices for instruction (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing that ability of school personnel to function as PLCs" (p. 11). Furthermore, DuFour and Eaker (1998) noted:

> Each word of the phrase "professional learning community" has been chosen purposefully. A "professional" is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base…. "Learning" suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity…The school that operates as a professional *learning* community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement…In a professional learning *community*, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (pp. 11-12).

Therefore, teachers are not expected to accomplish this education reform alone, instead work together as a learning community of professional educators.

Teacher learning in a PLC. PLCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn (DuFour, R. P., Eaker, R. & DuFour, R, 2005; Garrett, 2010). Researchers found that teachers who participate in high quality PLCs are provided with on-going professional development focusing on learning (DuFour et al.2005; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree,

Richardson & Orphanos, 2009). According to Ermeling and Gallimore (2013), current education is a learning environment for teachers as well as students. Likewise, Borko (2004) stated that providing learning opportunities for practicing teachers will develop teacher performance and lead to improved student achievement. Ermeling and Gallimore (2013) studied 40 districts across 20 states and suggested that PLCs that are structured and consist of clear objectives are successful in supporting teacher learning. Little (2002) added, "strong PLCs are important contributors to instructional improvement and school reform" (p. 936). For PLCs to be successful, learning must be ongoing and embedded in the daily routine (King, 2000). Furthermore, teachers have a direct contact with students on a daily basis and direct effect on how curriculum is taught, therefore "improving teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions through PLCs is a critical step in improving student achievement" (King, 2000, p. 576).

Hord and Sommers (2008) stated that "staff who are involved in a PLC provide higher intellectual learning tasks for their students because the bottom line of the PLC is to increase student learning" (p. 20). Furthermore, in order to improve student achievement PLCs must provide educators with new knowledge that engages students in learning (Joyce & Showers, 2003). According to Joyce and Showers (2003), the following four conditions must be present in PLCs to affect student learning: (1) must study together, put into practice what they learn, and share results; (2) focus on curricula and instructional strategies that affect student learning; (3) focus on students gaining knowledge and skills; and (4) implement in the classroom what they are learning (p. 4).

Wood (2007) supported the research that ongoing professional learning for teachers must be integral to their work. PLCs can provide a place for teachers to share

and build their knowledge and practice. Teachers must meet together to problem solve, create new ideas, evaluate teacher practice, and determine goals (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). When teachers are actively engaged in a PLC, they begin to "think of themselves as primary agents for necessary changes in teaching and learning" (Wood, 2007, p. 290).

Principal role in a PLC. According to DuFour (1999), principals provide an essential element to the success of PLCs. Today principals must concentrate on developing the capacity of the staff to function as a PLC. The principal's role should be to lead through shared vision and values rather than rules and procedures. Principals must enlist faculty members in school decision making processes and empower individuals to act. As instructional leaders, principals should provide staff members with the information, training, and parameters to make good decisions. Principals should be results-oriented. Principals should concentrate on posing the right questions rather than imposing solutions (DuFour, 1999). Furthermore, principals must "orchestrate rather than dictate, demand less command and control and more learning and leading, less macho and more maestro" (DuFour, 1999, p. 17).

Mullen and Hutinger (2008) explored the principal's role in facilitating and maintaining study groups that foster teacher learning and student achievement. The principal is in a position that can create an environment that nurtures teacher learning. Likewise, principals must create an environment where the PLC is focused on achieving goals for all students while challenging staff members to work together applying new knowledge to their practice (DuFour, 2004). To ensure success of the PLC Eaker and Keating (2012) stated:

> Highly effective principals ensure that teams are directed and supported in activities and tasks related to developing team norms, identifying and clarifying standards that are "essential" for every student to learn, monitoring the learning of each student on a frequent and timely basis through the collaborative development and use of common formative assessments, and collaboratively analyzing the results of formative assessments to make informed decisions regarding additional time, support, and enrichment for students, as well as, to reflect on the effectiveness of their own instructional strategies (p. 4).

A principal who is successful in implementing PLCs enhances the effectiveness of each PLC, therefore enhancing the effectiveness of individual teachers significantly (Eaker & Keating, 2012). According to Jessie (2007), principals must continue to observe instruction in the classroom; however, the focus must be on instructional results not instruction itself. Principals must focus on finding teachers' talents and showcasing those talents for the benefit of the group (Jessie, 2007).

PLCs are implemented into K-12 schools to help increase student learning by allowing teachers to talk collaboratively about their teaching and learning and the actions it will take to prepare students for the 21st century (Thompson,S., Gregg, L., & Niska, J. 2004). The work force has become a global market; therefore educators must prepare students to compete in this environment. PLCs provide teachers and principals the opportunities to learn together, collaboratively discuss strategies, and implement into the curriculum best practices for teachers to provide students the opportunities to be successful in today's global society.

Twenty-first century learners. According to Pearlman (2009), educational leaders are struggling to create schools and learning environments that serve the needs of 21st century students. It is critical for teachers to learn the competencies that ensure positive learning outcomes for 21st century students. The 21st century educator must develop a different type of teaching practice for the new millennium student in order to help students acquire knowledge and skills to cope with the demands of the 21st global century (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). Researchers have observed that 21st century educators must focus on creativity, innovation, and an understanding of the future (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). Students must learn how to learn (Pearlman, 2009).

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009) recommended the development of 21st century PLCs for teacher learning. Furthermore, these authors recommended 21st century PLC outcomes that (a) ensure educators understand the importance of 21st century skills and how to best integrate them into daily instruction; (b) enable collaboration among all participants; (c) allow teachers and principals to construct their own learning communities; (d) utilize the expertise within a school or school district through coaching, mentoring, and team teaching; (e) support educators in their role of facilitators of learning; and (f) use 21st century technology tools (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

Students today are "digital natives" engaged in a world of technology that allows communicating with peers throughout the world. Student learning environments must reflect the world in which they live in order to better prepare them for the future (Schneiderman, 2004). Engaging students through real world educational experiences is a key component of 21st century curriculum and instruction (Jerald, 2009; Partnership for

21st Century Skills, 2009). According to Rotherham (2009), students need critical thinking and problem-solving skills ranging from facts to complex analysis. To ensure that all students have access to an education that will prepare them with 21st Century Skills, Rotherham (2009) suggest the following:

> First, educators and policymakers must ensure that the instructional program is complete and the content is not shortchanged for an ephemeral pursuit of skills. Second, states, school districts, and schools need to revamp how they think about human capital in education-in particular how teachers are trained. Finally, we need new assessments that can accurately measure richer learning and more complex tasks (p. 18).

All three elements must occur simultaneously in order to prepare students with 21st Century Skills.

The conceptual frameworks of PLCs and 21st century learning provide guidance for principals supporting teachers learning in order to educate students with 21st Century Skills. In the United States there are schools that have high rates of poverty that have an impact on student learning. Educators are faced with the challenge to prepare all students with 21st Century Skills. Schools such as Torchbearer Schools have students living in poverty; however these students are being successful in the classroom.

High Academic Achievement and High Poverty Schools

In the 21st century, public schools are charged to educate all students. Historically, however, middle to upper income white students have had greater success than poor, minority students in U. S. schools (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Students in high-

poverty, high-minority schools typically do not achieve high academic standards in U. S. schools (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). According to the 2005 assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP), 13% of children living in poverty scored proficient, compared to 40% of students who were not poor (Murnane, 2007). Furthermore, "49% of students in poverty scored below the threshold of basic competency, compared to only 21% of students not living in poverty" (Murnane, 2007, p. 162). Lacour and Tissington (2011) suggested that students who live in poverty scored significantly lower than other students on standardized tests. According to Lacour and Tissington (2011), "although many poor students score below average on assessment measures, instructional techniques and strategies implemented at the classroom and school level can help close the achievement gap by providing students with necessary assistance in order to achieve high performance in academics" (p. 527).

Public schools, such as Torchbearer Schools in Alabama, that are identified as schools with high levels of poverty and high academic achievement, possess common characteristics. These high-poverty, high academic achieving schools attribute their success to the presence of high expectations, strong academic instructional focus, and frequent teacher collaboration (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Tilley et al., 2012). School-wide ethics of high expectations for faculty, staff, and students is a mantra for high-poverty, high-performing schools (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). According to Tilley et al., (2012), "the expectations focus on the actions that a teacher should take to ensure learning and improvement for all students" (p. 298). The principal has high expectations for faculty and staff and the faculty and staff members have high expectations for themselves and for their students (Kannapel & Clements,

2005). Academic focus is a factor that contributes to the success of high-poverty, high-achieving schools. According to Kannapel and Clements (2005), "the key seemed not to be what they were doing so much as the fact that the entire faculty and school community had focused consistently over time on academics, instruction, and student learning" (p. 17). Collaboration between teachers and administration is key to the success of at-risk schools (Tilley et al., 2012). Collaborative decision making where there is "no authoritarian or dictatorial leader but instead a faculty and staff involved in making most key decisions provides success for high poverty, high achieving schools" (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 18).

Reeves (2003) studied schools where more than 90 % of students received free or reduced price lunches, more than 90 % of students were minorities, and more than 90 % of students met or achieved high academic standards. Reeves called these schools the 90/90/90 schools, and discovered five characteristics common to all schools. These characteristics included: (a) a focus on academic achievement, (b) clear curriculum choices, (c) frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement, (d) an emphasis on nonfiction writing, and (e) collaborative scoring of student work (Reeves, 2003, p. 3). According to Reeves (2003), schools must have a focus on data driven, academic achievement. There must be clear curriculum choices for educators with frequent assessment of student progress. Likewise, teachers must have opportunities to collaborate to examine data. Reeves wrote, "these techniques hold promise for improving student achievement and closing the equity gap in schools of any demographic description" (p. 195).

Summary

Andragogy, the theory of adult learning, and the organizational learning literature as well as research about PLCs and 21st century learners provide a strong theoretical and conceptual foundation to guide the study of principal support for teacher learning through PLCs in selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. These frameworks provide support for the study by informing my understanding of how teachers in Torchbearer schools learn and how Torchbearer principals provide opportunities for teacher learning to take place.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In qualitative research, data are collected in a natural setting. Researchers collect the data themselves using multiple methods. Data are organized inductively and deductively to develop a holistic picture of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2013). According to Hatch (2002), "Qualitative researchers seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (p. 7). Stake (2010) suggested that qualitative research relies primarily on human perception and understanding. Furthermore, a qualitative researcher "tries to assure the reader that the purpose has not been to attain generalization but to add situational examples to the readers' experience" (Stake, 2010, p. 23). The purpose for using qualitative research for this study is to explore, in-depth, in the context of several selected Torchbearer schools, the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding leadership support for teacher learning in PLCs.

The intent of qualitative research is to "explore human behaviors within the context of their natural occurrences" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). To better understand stakeholder perceptions of principal support of teacher learning in PLCs, I used a multiple case study design in order to examine how principals support teacher learning who participate in PLCs in three selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama.

Design of Qualitative Inquiry

Regarding multiple case study design, Creswell (2013) stated:

> Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

According to Yin (2009), case study research occurs in a real-life setting that is bound by specific parameters. As noted by Creswell (2013), "In a multiple case study, the one issue or concern is selected for study, but the inquirer selects multiple cases or contexts to illustrate the issues" (p. 99). Yin (2009) suggested that researchers using multiple case study design implement the same procedures for each case study, replicating the same study in multiple settings. Therefore, case study research is the appropriate design for this study because it allowed me to explore the issues of how principals and teachers perceive principal support for teacher learning in PLCs in three Torchbearer schools in Alabama.

Philosophical Assumptions

Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers bring their own philosophical assumptions into the research. These philosophical assumptions are embedded in the researcher through past experiences and education. These philosophical assumptions guided me in choices that affect the research such as: identifying the problem and research questions, determining themes and subthemes, and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), there are four primary philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological.

As noted by Creswell (2013), "ontology issues relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics" (p. 20). I have a positivist paradigm belief of reality that is consistent

with the following statement “reality exists in an objective universe that has order independent of human perceptions” (Hatch, 2002, p. 12). Furthermore, reality has components that can be separated, studied, and put back together (Hatch, 2002). While teachers and principals have different human perceptions of teacher learning, all educators working in an objective universe understand the reality that learning takes place in education.

Creswell (2013) stated, “epistemological assumptions in qualitative research means the researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (p. 20). I sought to “maintain an objective position in relation to the phenomena being studied” (Hatch, 2002, p. 14). While I attempted to get as close as possible to the participants, the purpose of developing this relationship with the participants was solely to gather data for the study.

Creswell (2013) suggested “axiological assumptions are values the researcher brings to a study” (p. 20). I “positioned myself” in the study by reporting values and biases. For example, I have in-depth training on implementing and sustaining PLCs. I bracketed my knowledge of PLCs while collecting data for the study.

As noted by Creswell (2013), “methodology is the procedure of conducting qualitative research inductively, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (p. 22). I maintained a “constructivist paradigm spending extended periods of time interviewing participants and observing them in their natural setting in an effort to reconstruct the constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). Creswell (2013) recommended that researchers

approach the process of inquiry by using an inductive logic; studying the topic within its context, and using an emerging design obtained through methods such as interviewing, observation, and analysis of texts.

I acknowledge that philosophical assumptions affected the research methods. According to Hatch (2002), these assumptions are "indeed completing ways of thinking about how the world is or is not ordered, what counts as knowledge, and how and if knowledge can be gained" (p. 19). These assumptions guided my methods of conducting a qualitative study in my relationship to reality, relationship with participants, biases, and data collection.

Sampling

I utilized purposeful sampling, "by selecting individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). As the criteria for sampling, I have purposefully selected 2012-2013 Torchbearer Schools from Alabama whose teachers participated in PLCs. The Torchbearer Schools were those awarded Torchbearer status in 2012-2013. According to Patton (1990), "critical case sampling can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (p. 174). Furthermore, "the focus of the data gathering in this instance is on understanding what is happening in that critical case" (Patton, 1990, p. 174). I considered PLCs with different levels of implementation. The sampling of 2012-2013 Torchbearer Schools in Alabama that participate in PLCs provided me with an understanding of what is or is not occurring in these sites.

Site selection. This multiple case study research involved three schools located in Alabama. The schools were elementary 2012-2013 Torchbearer Schools that participated in PLCs. All schools had 80% of students at or below the poverty rate. Poverty rate for the purpose of this study was defined as students whose families qualify for free or reduced price school meals. Additionally, all schools had at least 80% of the students scoring at Level III or Level IV on the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test. All three schools had implemented PLCs for a minimum of one school year.

Because of their extensive knowledge of and work with PLCs across the state of Alabama, I asked professional educators working with the Alabama Math, Science, Technology, Initiative (AMSTI) to provide expert nominations or recommendations for sites that are actively engaged in the PLC processes. AMSTI is the Alabama Department of Education's initiative to improve math and science teaching statewide. Its mission is to provide all students in grades K-12 with the knowledge and skills needed for success in the workforce and/or postsecondary studies (AMSTI, 2013). AMSTI is the largest and most comprehensive math and science initiative in the nation, being a leading model for math and science education reform (AMSTI, 2013). In 2008 AMSTI partnered with Learning Forward to provide intense PLC training for school districts throughout the state. AMSTI conducted follow up professional development for implementing and sustaining PLCs. The expertise of AMSTI professionals benefited me in locating 2012-2013 Torchbearer Schools in Alabama that have implemented PLCs for a minimum of one school year.

Because of their expertise in staff development in the AMSTI disciplines, and because of their knowledge and training in the establishment and implementation of the

PLC model in schools, I asked the AMSTI representatives to nominate potential case study schools for my research based upon their knowledge of the inner workings of the PLCs within Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. AMSTI representatives provided a list of six Torchbearer Schools which they believed qualified, given the criteria stated. Of the six nominees, three schools agreed to participate in the study.

The three schools that agreed to participate in the study are also Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) sites. ARI provides professional development and support in teaching reading. ARI's mission is to provide high-quality professional development and support to ensure student literacy skills.

Sample selection. According to Creswell (2013), "a general guideline for sample size in qualitative research is not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied" (p. 157). Creswell (2013) recommended that case study research not exceed four or five cases. I conducted three case studies. I chose a sample size of one administrator and one PLC (or group of teacher learners) from each school in an effort to conduct thorough interviews and to spend a sufficient amount of time with each participant and group in order to gain an understanding of the principal behaviors that facilitate adult learning in each context. Each PLC consisted of a maximum of eight teachers. Each school was an elementary school so that the research could be conducted with a variety of grade level teachers teaching grades Kindergarten through sixth grade.

Recruitment of participants. As mentioned earlier, I consulted AMSTI for selecting sites. From the recommendations of AMSTI, I contacted superintendents of

each school via email and follow-up telephone calls if needed to obtain permission to contact the principal of the identified Torchbearer School in the superintendent's district to seek their participation in the study. Once permission was granted from the superintendent with a signed consent letter (Appendix A), I contacted principals via email with a recruitment letter (Appendix B) to ask principals and PLC teachers to participate in the study. Principals and teachers were informed of the purpose of and guidelines for the study. I followed the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards for recruitment of participants including access for interviews and confidentiality.

Data Collection

According to Stake (2010), "qualitative researchers seek data that represent personal experience in particular situations" (p. 88). For this study, I focused on the personal experiences and perceptions of principals and teachers in PLCs regarding how teachers learn in this situation and how principals support teacher learning. Creswell (2013) stated that "data collection is a process of engaging in activities that include but go beyond collecting data" (p. 145). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) suggested that data collection is more than interviews and observations; it is building rapport and establishing relationships in order to gain appropriate data.

Data sources. As noted by Creswell (2013) "case study data collection involves a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case" (p. 162). I used multiple forms of data collection for the study, including one-on-one and focus group interviews, observations, and document review. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each principal from the three sites. Once principal interviews

had been conducted, I observed one PLC meeting located at each site. To clarify questions from the PLC meetings and gain additional data, I conducted focus group interviews with PLC group leaders. Each school had between five and six PLC groups. Two of the schools PLCs were grade level specific and one of the schools PLCs consisted of a math PLC, reading PLC, writing PLC, science PLC, and technology PLC. The principal from each school selected the leader of each PLC. The focus group interviews involved the leader from each PLC.

In order to gain further insights into how PLCs functioned in each school, a review of documents from each selected study site was conducted. Furthermore, professional learning plans (PLP), or annual, individualized professional development plans, from each teacher in the PLC were collected. PLC meeting agendas and minutes were also collected. After completing all interviews and the review of documents, I returned to the principal for a follow-up interview for final clarification of data collected and member checking.

Data collection process. Principals from the three selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama were interviewed. Following principal interviews, one PLC meeting at each site was observed. Next, focus group interview with each of the PLC group leaders were conducted in order to clarify information from PLC meetings. Finally, I conducted a document review of supporting data.

Principal interviews. In order to gain insights from each of the school principals, I developed an interview protocol that consisted of in-depth questions (Appendix C). I interviewed each principal in his/her office. The interview lasted approximately 45

minutes and was audio recorded. I transcribed the audio recordings verbatim within 48 hours of the interview. The transcription was emailed to each participant for him/her to verify accuracy in the transcription.

PLC observation. Following principal interviews PLC meetings were observed at each site. I functioned as an observer, or as an "outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance" (Creswell, 2013, p. 166). I took field notes and audio recorded the meeting to reference for data interpretation. The PLC meetings lasted approximately 60 minutes and were held in the usual location in the school where the selected PLC meets.

Focus group interviews. The PLCs at each school consisted of a teacher leader who was responsible for leading the PLC. Focus group interview with each of the teacher PLC group leaders were conducted to gather additional data about their perceptions of what principal behaviors support their learning and in order to make clarifications from previous interviews and observations. Focus group interviews lasted no less than 45 minutes each and were held in the school library or conference room. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the interviews. Prior to conducting the focus group interview, I identified one group member volunteer who was willing to receive and review an emailed transcription of the focus group interview in order to verify accuracy of the transcript.

Document review. A copy of the PLPs from each teacher who participated in the PLC and focus group interview was requested. The PLPs provided evidence of teacher learning for the researcher. Furthermore, PLC meeting agendas and minutes from

meetings were requested for document review. The teachers who participated in the focus group interviews were PLC leaders at their site. These documents provided evidence of teacher learning in PLCs.

Principal follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews with each principal after conducting observations, focus groups, and document review were conducted in order to clarify all data collected about the principals' own perceptions of how they support teacher learning through participating in PLCs. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were audio recorded. I transcribed the audio recordings verbatim within 48 hours of the interview. The transcription was emailed to each participant for him/her to verify accuracy in the transcription.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning (Creswell, 2012; Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990; Stake, 2010). According to Hatch (2002), "analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories" (p. 148). As noted by Patton (1990), "the challenge in data analysis is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (pp. 371-372).

I used Creswell's (2013) data analysis spiral, "engaging in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 182). The first step in the data analysis of the study was to organize the data. For this study, audio recorded

interviews with the individual principals and teacher participants of the study were conducted. The audio recordings were transcribed within 48 hours of the interviews. I analyzed data during the collection procedure as well as after the data were collected (Creswell, 2008). I used NVivo 10 data analysis software to organize codes, themes, and sub-themes from the transcripts.

When analyzing data in a multiple case study, the researcher must analyze the data at two levels: within-case and across-cases (Stake, 2010). First I analyzed these data within each of the three cases. After the analysis of each case was complete, I conducted a cross-case analysis in which I compared and contrasted the themes and sub-themes from each case and developed categories that emerged through the cross-case analysis. This cross-case analysis helped me to identify uniformity and disparity across the cases (Stake, 2010).

Creswell (2013) stated, "themes in qualitative research are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). These themes can be divided into sub-themes representing segments of the data. I coded data by categorizing words or phrases into themes and sub-themes. This was done by reflecting back on participants' words or phrases that were repeatedly mentioned. Once the coding was completed, codes were grouped together to identify any redundancies. I then re-read the text for accuracy of codes and to identify any emergent themes as they related to the central research question. Once themes were established I represented the data using text and tables.

Establishing Credibility

According to Creswell and Miller (2000) qualitative researchers need to validate that their studies are credible. There are numerous procedures for researchers to employ to help validate the credibility of their studies (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). To establish credibility of this report, a number of recommended procedures were employed. As Creswell (2013) suggested, qualitative researchers routinely employ thick description, member checking, peer review, audit trail and triangulation, therefore these techniques were utilized in the study.

As noted by Creswell (2013), "rich, thick descriptions allow readers to make decisions regarding the data presented and its transferability to other contexts" (p. 252). Thick description means that the researcher "provides details when describing a case or when writing about a theme" (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). According to Stake (2010), a description is rich if it provides "abundant, interconnected details" (p. 49). I provided rich, thick descriptions in the analysis of the research in order to establish credibility.

The second strategy used to increase trustworthiness and credibility was member checking. Stake (2010) stated, "member checking is presenting a recording or draft copy of an observation or interview to the persons providing the information and asking for correction and comment" (p. 126). To ensure the credibility of the study, participants were asked to review the interview transcripts to determine if the information and narrative were correct.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described an audit trail as a transparent description of the steps taken by the researcher from the beginning of the project to the reporting of the

findings. I kept a record of what was done in the investigation to clarify all major decisions made through the process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a peer reviewer is an individual who keeps the researcher honest by asking hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations. I used an audit trail and a peer review process, having a colleague, who is also a doctoral student, review the research. I provided her a copy of the data collection process, transcripts, and themes. She and I discussed how the data was collected and analyzed in order to strengthen the credibility of the study.

The final strategy used to verify the trustworthiness and credibility was triangulation of the data. According to Hatch (2002), "triangulation is used to confirm information obtained from another informant" (p. 93). To ensure credibility of the study, different sources were used for information such as individual interview and focus group interview transcripts, review of individual teachers' PLPs, and meeting agenda/minutes to develop themes and sub-themes. I interviewed principals and teachers from different school districts in Alabama. Additional resources were used, such as PLC meeting minutes and interview transcripts to verify information and to develop themes. PLC meetings were observed. In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted with principals and teachers to clarify any questions that arose from the data. According to Creswell (2013), "in triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence" (p. 251). I used triangulation to verify themes and sub-themes thus adding to the credibility of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an extremely important aspect of research and should be addressed as a primary concern when asking individuals to participate in a study. Throughout this qualitative study, I followed ethical standards for research. Approval from the IRB was obtained before the research was conducted.

According to Creswell (2012), individuals who agree to participate in a research study have certain rights. Creswell (2012) stated, "individuals need to know the purpose and aims of the study, how the results will be used, and the likely social consequences the study will have on their lives" (p.23). Therefore, participants were informed of how the study purpose and results would benefit all those involved by obtaining a better and deeper understanding of the leadership support for teacher learning by those teachers who participated in PLCs. All ethical issues, including the issues of being a voluntary participant, were discussed in the recruitment letter which was sent to the participants before participation agreement was obtained.

Hatch (2002) stated, "…ethics finally come down to individual researchers making the best judgments they can to insure that the individuals they study are treated with fairness and dignity" (p.69). The topic of confidentiality was addressed during the interview process by allowing participants to choose a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. Hatch further stated, "We ask a lot when we ask individuals to participate in our qualitative studies" (p. 65). If I do not explain the ethical considerations to them, the study may lack credibility and trustworthiness. As a researcher and educational

professional, it was my responsibility to ensure confidentiality of the participants throughout the process and beyond.

Finally, data storage/access and ownership was addressed. Throughout the study, all data were stored on an encrypted computer which remained locked and secured at all times by me. After the research was completed, all data were erased and cleaned and all hard copy data were shredded at one location. The steps of destroying all data were taken place in order to protect participant privacy.

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2009) "qualitative research is interpretative research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants" (p. 177). Furthermore, Stake (2010) stated "the role of the researcher will be an instrument, observing action and contexts, often intentionally playing a subjective role in the study, using personal experiences in making interpretations" (pp. 19-20). In order to obtain the most credible data, I bracketed personal experiences so as not to influence the research study. In order to be open and receptive to the data I attempted to understand my role by acknowledging personal assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions of PLCs (Hatch, 2002).

I have been in education for 12 years. I am currently the principal of a Torchbearer elementary school that had participated in PLCs for three years. Furthermore, I have extensive training in developing and implementing PLCs in elementary schools. I feel that PLCs are the most effective tool for professional development to be implemented into classroom instruction. During the study I

"bracketed" this knowledge and my thoughts of PLCs in order to obtain the most credible information for this research.

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed how a qualitative research approach, and specifically a multiple case study design, is appropriate for conducting this study. I have defined philosophical assumptions and articulated how each guided this research. I described the steps I followed in conducting the research, establishing trustworthiness and credibility, and addressing ethical considerations. In the next chapter I describe my findings across the three cases.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Qualitative research has the potential to change the education world, by placing the researcher inside the world of education, and making this world visible to all (Creswell, 2013). Through my discussions with principals and teacher leaders, using a qualitative research design, I explored and discovered how educators were changing their world.

Setting/Content

This research focused on three schools serving students in Kindergarten through sixth grade in Alabama Torchbearer Schools with PLCs in place for at least one year. These schools were chosen based on their participation in PLCs in order to meet the requirements of the research questions and study.

The first of the three schools was School A in North Alabama. This school was opened in 1965 and located in a suburban area in the middle of a neighborhood. Within blocks of the school are a high school, hospital, mall, and numerous restaurants. Neighborhood homes are well-kept with large spacious yards. School building and playground are well maintained and inviting to guests. The atmosphere of the school is friendly and welcoming.

The school was a Title I school that consisted of grades Kindergarten through fifth grade with 366 students. The student population consisted of 48% African American, 22% Caucasian, and 30% Hispanic. School A had 91% of the student body

who received free and reduced lunches. School A was an Alabama Math and Science Initiative (AMSTI) school as well as an Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) site. Teachers participated in professional development activities throughout the year based on these programs. The faculty consisted of 30 teachers, including one special education teacher, one media specialist, one counselor, and one principal. School climate was very prominent at School A, the teachers interviewed spoke of high morale and collaboration with all faculty and staff. This school had been involved in PLCs for three school years. School A had multiple PLCs such as grade level PLCs, math PLCs, writing PLCs, and reading PLCs that met monthly. PLCs consisted of teacher leaders, classroom teachers, special education teacher, and a counselor.

The second school was School B located in North Alabama. The school opened in 1984 and is located in the heart of a strong working class community. Over the past few years the economy downturn has had a negative effect on the families living in this community. School B building and playground are well maintained and inviting for guests. Halls of the school display student work, displaying a pride in what students are accomplishing.

School B was a Kindergarten through fifth grade school with approximately 344 students. Student population consisted of 48% African American, 23% Caucasian, and 29% Hispanic. School B had 85% of the student body who received free and reduced lunches. The faculty consisted of 31 teachers, including one special education teacher, one media specialist, one counselor, and one principal. School B was a Title I school that received federal funds to support academic achievement for students in poverty as well as professional development opportunities for the faculty and staff. The atmosphere of the

school was friendly and inviting. This school had participated in PLCs for three school years. PLCs were grade level PLCs that consisted of lead teachers, classroom teachers, special education teacher, and counselor. Each team met monthly with the focus of the PLCs as math instruction and writing.

The third school was School C located in South Alabama. This school opened in the early 1900s, however the current building was built in 1968. School C was located in a rural community with no neighborhoods in sight of the school. There were very few houses located around the school. The school building and playground were well maintained. Halls and cafeteria were newly painted. Students wore uniforms that consisted of solid white or red polo shirts with navy pants or shorts.

The school was a Title I school that received federal funds. It was a Kindergarten through fifth grade school with approximately 467 students. Classrooms had a large number of students, much more than the department of education recommends. For example, according to the Southern Regional Education Board (2012), Alabama recommendation is 20 students per class; however, one of the first grade classrooms in School C contained 26 students. Student population consisted of 15% African American and 85% Caucasian. School C had 83% of the student body who received free and reduced lunches. The faculty consisted of 32 teachers, including one special education teacher, one media specialist, one counselor, and one principal. The culture of the school was very positive and focused on student learning. Student work was displayed throughout the school with an emphasis on standards- based learning. This school had begun implementing PLCs eight years earlier. Each teacher participated in professional development activities focusing on participating, implementing, and sustaining PLCs.

Each PLC was a vertical team consisting of a teacher from each grade level. Each PLC had a teacher leader and co-leader. Each team had a different focus; math, reading, science, writing, and technology. Each team met every six to eight weeks, with a minimum of four meetings per school year.

Participants

In order to answer the research questions and give insight to the study, I chose to interview teacher leaders that lead PLCs in their schools from three different schools in different areas of the state. I also interviewed the principals of each school. The participants represented various levels of teaching experience and thoughts on PLCs. In order to maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was selected by the participant. Table 2 provides a complete list of participants.

Table 2

Participants by School

Principal/ Teacher	School	Years' Experience	Grade Level Taught	Years' PLC Experience
Anderton	A	28	Principal	3
Smith	A	7	1st	3
Robinson	A	32	Kindergarten	3
Horton	A	24	3rd	3
Buffaloe	A	13	2nd	3
Robertson	A	17	Special Ed	3
Pounders	B	18	Principal	3
Parker	B	28	1st grade	3
Whitten	B	31	Kindergarten	3
Mann	B	6	5th	3
Richter	B	15	4th	3
Thompson	C	28	Principal	8
McDaniel	C	10	Technology	8
Lambert	C	10	4th	8
Massey	C	24	Reading Coach	8
Girsch	C	8	3rd	8

Themes and Subthemes

The analysis of participant interviews, PLC meeting minutes and PLP's revealed five major themes. I used NVivo software to organize the data and to prioritize themes and subthemes. Those themes were: (a) *communication*, (b) *school culture*, (c) *personal gains*, (d) *purpose and implementation*, and (e) *structure and organization*. I will present

each theme and expand upon each subtheme in the following section. A complete list of themes and subthemes can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes of How Principal Support for Teacher Learning in Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools

Themes	Subthemes
Communication	Feedback Trust
School Culture	Benefits Collaboration Enhancing Student Engagement Teacher Interaction
Personal Gains	Reflective Practice Openness Application
Purpose and Implementation	Data Goal-setting Increase Student Performance
Structure and Organization	Challenges Expectations

Communication. Communication was one of the themes that emerged as I analyzed the data collected for the study. The principals and teachers were asked to discuss what principal behaviors support teacher learning in their school. The principals suggested that communication between themselves and teachers provide support for teacher learning in PLCs. The teachers suggested it was important to have opportunities to talk with principals about their learning. Ms. Smith stated, "Communication I guess, just being able to talk to each other." Other statements such as "We are able to

communicate with the principal and other teachers, learn from each other, and share ideas," relate to the importance of communication. Ms. Thompson, the principal from School C stated "It is important that the principal has an open door policy to allow teachers the freedom to communicate their learning with the principal." The subthemes of feedback, collaboration and trust were identified.

Feedback. The importance of communication between the principal and the teachers in the PLC process was revealed in statements such as "After the PLC meeting, we use what we have learned from the PLC in the classroom and we bring something back that shows we tried it and receive feedback from the principal and other members of the PLC." Teachers revealed how they were able to get feedback from their principal and one another through communicating in PLCs. The principal provided feedback for teacher learning by looking at PLC meeting minutes and discussing with teachers what they had learned. Ms. Buffaloe stated, "We turn in minutes from our PLC meetings to the principal…We support each other [principal and teacher]….We stay on the same page."

Trust. Trust was the third subtheme that emerged under the broader theme of communication. Teachers discussed trust and transparency and were able to communicate concerns and ask for assistance in a safe collaborative environment with their principal. Participants discussed a mutual trust between the principal and teachers. Principals trusted the teachers to be professional and use their professional judgment while learning in the PLCs. The teachers trusted the principals in providing support and resources needed for the PLCs to be successful. Ms. Robinson stated, "We feel safe to say what is going on…she [principal] has a hands-off but door open policy and that makes a difference."

Summary of Theme: Communication. Communication is essential to the teachers who participated in the PLCs. In order for principals to support teacher learning there must be ongoing communication between teachers and principals. Furthermore, teachers must be able to be transparent, take risks and learn from each other. Feedback from the principal has to provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and implement that learning in the classroom. Trust between the principal and the teacher is a key component for principal support for teacher learning in PLCs. Additionally, the principal must provide support for teacher learning through building trust as professionals in the learning organization. The principal and the PLC must work together as a team to help increase teacher learning through communication, feedback, and trust.

School culture. Principals and teachers in the study revealed that school culture was a major influence on principals supporting teacher learning in PLCs. The environment of any school or business sets the climate for that particular place. Principals discussed the importance of a safe and happy environment in which to learn and how the environment makes an impact on teachers and their ability to learn and grow professionally. The culture of the school is the base for which learning takes place. Ms. Thompson, principal from School C stated "Culture is the platform for learning; and your instructional strategies and teacher learning build-up from the culture." I found that same sentiment when talking with the other principals and teachers at the three schools in the study.

The culture of each school is set by the leadership of the principal. A culture of focusing on teacher learning and growing from each other was discussed by all three principals. Principals of the school set an example by learning and growing themselves.

Ms. Pounders, the principal from School B stated, "I am constantly learning new things as the instructional leader of the school." Principals must make learning a priority and change the culture into a learning organization. Ms. Anderton stated, "I felt like our faculty meetings in the past were geared toward to do lists, note taking, setting dates on the calendar and I felt it would be more productive to have PD during that time." Ms. Anderton, as the principal of the school, changed the culture of traditional faculty meetings to a meeting of teachers' learning.

Teacher leadership. A cultural benefit discussed by participants in the study was teacher leadership. The principals at each school encouraged teachers to become leaders at the schools. Ms. Pounders stated, "I see teachers with leadership qualities and I encourage them to be teacher leaders in the school." The teachers were taking on a responsibility of leadership when they agreed to be a part of the PLC. Ms. Lambert stated, "As the facilitator of a PLC, my principal provides the opportunity for me to go to other schools in my area to meet with other facilitators and we work together to know where to drive our home PLCs at our schools." The principal must foster the teachers ability to learn from other districts as a teacher leader and bring back that information to their home PLC. This is a cultural benefit of principals supporting teacher learning discussed from many of the participants.

Collaboration. Collaboration between the principal and the PLC as well was within the PLC is a cultural characteristic discussed by the participants. During a PLC meeting I observed discussions centered around forming strategies and conquering identified areas of weakness within a school. Ms. Massy was quoted in the PLC meeting minutes as saying, "In the PLC meeting we focused on how we can improve student

learning while students are in our classroom." The teachers talked with the principal about their fears of particular strategies not working in their classrooms. Ms. Parker mentioned this type scenario when she said, "I think it opens those boundaries to allow teachers to share with each other and know that sometimes things just don't work right in the classroom." She went on to say, "By participating in PLCs, it gives me the opportunity to ask for help from the principal and other teachers and see how it's working somewhere else." Ms. Parker stressed the fact that her principal supports teachers in PLCs learning together to help all teachers in the school. Sometimes it helps to see examples in other classrooms in order to understand how it can work. Ms. Massey made a statement concerning observations for that reason. She stated, "The PLC team observed Ms. Johnson's lesson and learned effective strategies to engage students in a lesson." Another PLC team explained that in her school, teachers video record themselves teaching lessons in their classrooms. Later, teachers view that recording in the PLC meetings allowing for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other by discussing strengths and weaknesses observed in the recorded lesson. The principals set an expectation for teachers to collaborate with one another in the PLC in order for teacher learning to occur.

The teachers spoke very highly of the collaboration efforts of all team members throughout the PLC process. Ms. Mann stated, "It is good to share ideas with each other, and a lot of times it is not even our formal meeting." The principals support teachers' abilities to learn how to unite and respond to new ideas. Teachers were forming new ways to listen, observe, and learn from the team members. Ms. Lambert stated, " Once we learn something, we go into the classroom and apply it, looking at your data all

along….If it is not working we go back and look to see what it is that we need to learn in order to help the students achieve." It was obvious, in the selected schools, that principals supported this collaboration among teachers in order for teacher learning to flourish in the PLC.

Enhancing student engagement. Principals and teachers also discussed student engagement as being an important part of the culture and an important result of principals supporting teacher learning. The participants talked about the importance of student engagement and how it related to their learning. If a teacher implements in the classroom what he or she has learned in PLCs, the goal is for student engagement to increase. Ms. Whitten stated during a PLC meeting, "Students will be better prepared for standardized tests because of the depth of knowledge that will be obtained, by teachers implementing educational strategies learned in PLCs in the classroom." These teachers have learned that it takes principals and teachers working together to make the necessary changes in student engagement.

Summary of Theme: School Culture. Impact on school culture was an evident theme throughout each interview conducted. Principals set the culture of the school. In turn, the culture of the school has a direct impact on teacher learning. Schools I observed shared cultures characterized of principals supporting teacher leadership, teacher collaboration, and an emphasis on enhancing student engagement. I observed strong cultures of principals encouraging teachers sharing with one another regarding their instructional practice, modifying their practice as needed to achieve common goals such as increased student engagement, and high levels of principals and teachers bonding with one another, listening and helping each other through the learning process.

Personal gains. Through interviews, PLC meeting minutes and PLP plans, participants revealed that principals supported teacher learning by allowing teachers to be able to grow at a personal level. Participants commented that in some way they received personal gains by participating in their PLC. Personal learning took place at each site with each teacher. Ms. Lambert stated, "PLCs have allowed us to go deeper in the content, not just scraping the surface." Principals and teachers felt that personal gains occur when teachers open up in the PLC and are honest about their learning. Furthermore, principals must recognize the personal gains of teachers' learning and celebrate these successes to ensure teacher learning continues in PLCs.

Reflective practice. The root of reflection is looking inward and being able to identify strengths and weaknesses. Through their PLC, many of the participants recognized how self-improvement became a byproduct of participation. Ms. Anderton, principal of School A, discussed that her teachers "reflect on their learning" through the PLC and document their reflection in their PLP. Participants discussed how their participation in PLCs affected their PLP. Ms. Horton stated, "Our PLP helps us focus and reflect on what we have learned in the PLC." Principals support for teacher learning in PLCs helped the teachers achieve their goals for the PLP. Additionally, principals set an expectation for teachers to reflect on their learning. By reflecting on their learning and comparing to the PLC goals, the participants were able to identify ways to grow personally as an educator. As teachers reflected on their teaching practice it was important for them to recognize what was effective and stay current in their field.

Openness. Even though PLC structures varied from school to school, it was common to find that openness took place between the principals and teachers. Openness

was identified as a main component of sharing between principal and teachers. The more open principals and teachers were, the more sharing took place. Participants shared that they were able to learn from all PLC members, no matter their grade level, and commonly were able to grow personally by sharing with teachers in other grade levels. Ms. Thompson, principal at School C, stated, "You have to have courage to say what is real…being open and sharing with each other helps us all grow." Principals' support for teacher learning provided opportunities for teachers to be open and learn from each other in the PLC.

Application. The ultimate benefit of personal gains through a PLC was when teachers took what they learned in the PLC and applied their learning to the curriculum, integrating this new learning into their daily practice. Principals also discussed how participating in PLCs helped their teachers reach their personal goals to improve their instructional practice in their PLP. Ms. Anderton stated, "We incorporate into our PLP the goals planned for our PLC." This helps the principal identify if the teacher is putting into practice what they are learning in the PLC.

Teachers discussed the benefits of learning in a PLC and the impact this learning had on their practice. Ms. Lambert stated, "I already know what I am working on in my PLC and I know I am getting support throughout the year and I already know I am having to practice and get better so by the end of the year I should be able to achieve my goals." Teachers felt that principal support through the PLC had a greater influence on their learning than when they were not participating in PLCs. Ms. Massey stated, "Before we started PLCs, I did not feel I was integrating much of anything and I just felt like I was there, I had met the standard but did not go any deeper. So now that we have PLCs,

people are really able to dig deeper. We have time to really learn and work together." Learning took place in many ways and the principals and teachers acknowledged that learning in PLCs had influenced their PLP and that what they had learned in their PLC settings was impacting their practice of daily instruction in the classroom.

Summary of Theme: Personal Gains. Participants in this study identified several ways in which principals supported teacher learning through participation in PLCs and the ways this participation in PLCs impacted them personally. Reflecting on their personal teaching practices through their PLPs and working in the PLC allowed them to find ways for self-improvement. Teachers reported increased levels of reflection on their own practice and incorporation of new ideas into their teaching. Being open and sharing between principals and teachers increased personal learning in their PLC. Principals and teachers being open and sharing together introduced more instructional ideas and strategies from which each teacher could grow. Personal gains from participating in a PLC were realized through the process of setting personal goals that were influenced by the PLC goals.

Purpose and Implementation. Participants revealed that principal support for teacher learning in the PLC was successful due to the purpose behind each strategy. When principals created the PLC within each school, the explicit purpose was to increase teacher learning. This purpose was the driving force for the PLC to be effective and successful. Principals and teachers focused on this purpose in order to create PLCs where teacher learning occurred.

Data. The explicit purpose of the PLC, that is increased teacher learning, was evident in several different areas. One of the areas where the participants found PLCs were useful

to their learning was the principals' expectation of them to analyze data and to regularly review self-assessments of their own teaching. Every year, teachers were required by their principals to analyze all test data in order to plan lessons for the year. Ms. Anderton stated, "Every year we look at our data to determine goals for our PLC." Data regarding student achievement helped determine the direction of learning for the teachers in the PLC. Ms. Smith stated, "We use our data to set short term and long term goals. For example, if students in multiple classes are having trouble with adding in math, our PLC goals will focus on research that addresses this weakness." Each of the principals stressed the importance of having a purpose-driven PLC plan. In order to move forward for improvement, goals must be set and you must have a purpose in mind. The data from each school helped provide the purpose for teacher learning in the PLCs.

Goal-setting. Principals understood that the sole purpose for the PLC was to improve teacher learning and therefore have an impact on instruction. As I explored how principals supported teacher learning in PLCs, I found that goal-setting and establishing clear expectations played a very important role in the successful future of a PLC. Principals and teachers set goals for themselves and the expectations were clearly stated. Ms. Thompson, principal from school C, said, "Honestly I feel that if you are going to spend your time doing something then you need to spend your time, all of us learning and growing and seeing what works and what doesn't work. If we don't do that we can't ever get better…Teachers will not be successful unless I insist on clearly focused goals. That is just the bottom line." Principals discussed that in order for the PLC to be successful, all parties must have a goal-oriented mind set. Ms. Buffaloe stated, "Our goal is to reach every child in the classroom and learning in PLCs helps with this goal." In other words,

principals and teachers alike expressed their opinion that goal-setting guided teacher learning and ultimately had an impact on student learning.

Increase student performance. Principals' support for teacher learning in PLCs helped teachers focus on improving student performance. Principals in the study discussed the importance of teachers taking what they learn in the PLC and implementing their learning into the classroom to increase student performance. Furthermore, the teachers felt it was important to implement what they learned in PLCs in the classroom. Ms. Robinson stated, "We take what we learned to the kids and work with them…If what we tried did not work with the kids, we talk about it in our PLC and what we need to do next to help our kids." Principals felt that it was important for teachers to try different strategies the teachers had learned in PLCs to help the students in their classroom. Ms. Lambert stated, "We look at kids and we look to see, 'Did the kids get your goal?' Whatever you want to happen, 'Did your kids get it?' That drives our PLC."

As I probed further, I noted that the principals tended to focus on the purpose of closing the gaps of student achievement. As PLCs create goals for teacher learning, during this learning, teachers search for ways to close the learning gaps for every student. Principals and teachers discussed looking at research based strategies for teachers to use in their instruction to ensure student success.

Many of the participants discussed the importance of learning the components of their curriculum in their PLCs. Ms. Girsch stated, "We are really looking heavily at the curriculum because that is something that we need to understand better." Principals felt that teachers must know their curriculum and learning in PLCs provides this learning

opportunity. Furthermore, principals feel that teachers learning their curriculum in PLCs and taking back this learning to the classroom will increase student learning.

Summary of Theme: Purpose and Implementation. Principals in this study established that the purpose of their PLCs were to increase teacher learning. With this purpose in mind, principals and teachers were able to look at student data, set goals, and establish high expectations for themselves. Principals focused on making sure teacher learning was the driving force of their PLCs. Therefore, teacher learning provided a focus on increasing student performance.

Structures and organization. This theme emerged as I asked participants to discuss the structure and the organization of their PLCs. Principals provide the structural expectation for the PLCs. For example, the PLC would be structured as a grade level PLC or a subject specific PLC (e.g., math, reading, technology). The principal also provides organizational expectations for the PLC such as location and frequency of meetings. Furthermore, the principals expected PLC members to keep documentation of teacher learning while participating in the PLC.

Challenges. The principals and teachers discussed challenges that occurred when discussing the structure and organization of their PLCs. Principals suggested it was a challenge structuring the membership of the PLC teams with members focused on the same goals. Therefore, principals discussed giving teachers choices regarding which PLC to join. This allowed teachers the opportunity to learn what they felt was important to them. However, there were times when the principal placed a teacher in a PLC to help increase learning in a particular area. Ms. Thompson principal at School C stated, "If I look at a teacher's student data and classroom observations and see that she needs

additional help in teaching math, I will place that teacher in the math PLC." Therefore, the membership of the PLC can be a challenge for principals in making sure the members work together as a learning organization.

Teachers discussed not wanting to fail and not wanting the PLC to fail. Furthermore, teachers discussed being on teams that had failed in the past due to lack of expectations. Principals discussed setting an expectation for the teams to learn together to help mitigate this challenge. Teachers felt this was important for the success of the PLC. Ms. Smith stated, "I have been on teams that in our meetings we did not accomplish anything. I am thrilled that our principal expects us to work together and help each other grow."

Time was a challenge mentioned by the participants. Principals discussed providing adequate amount of time for teachers to learn, process their learning, implement their learning in the classroom, and determine if the learning was effective for student achievement. Ms. Lambert stated, "It may take two or more years to dig deep into the learning and try out what you learn in the classroom, this is better than skimming the surface and not digging deeper in the learning, and this takes time." Structure and organization of the PLCs provided principals and teachers the opportunities to discuss these challenges and work toward a resolution.

Expectations. Principals discussed expectations for structure and organization of the PLCs. Principals organized the PLCs for participants to learn together and have an impact on instruction. Additionally, principals set the expectation that teachers are to meet on a regular basis.

Furthermore, during the meetings the teachers are to document what learning is taking place. This documentation was turned into the principals as evidence of teacher learning. Ms. Mann, a first grade teacher from School B stated, "Our principal expects us to turn in PLC minutes at the end of each meeting, documenting what we discussed." Ms. Thompson, principal at School C, has been implementing PLCs at her school for eight years and decided this year her teachers would video lessons in the classroom as documentation for teacher learning. Ms. Lambert, a 4th grade teacher at School C stated, "During PLC meetings teachers are to bring in video evidence of teacher learning. We do not care as much about what the teacher is doing, we care about what the student is doing and are the effects of teacher learning having an impact on the student?" The principal feels this expectation provides evidence of teacher learning that has an impact on student achievement.

Summary of Theme: Structure and Organization. Principals in the study frequently discussed the structure and organization of their PLCs. There were challenges that arose in the structure and organization of the PLCs. These challenges of membership included structure in the PLC, teachers not wanting to fail, and time issues. Teachers discussed the importance of principal involvement in the structure and organization of the PLC. Principals felt that setting expectations for documenting teacher learning was essential for the success of the PLC. However, time and structure seem to not be factors that differentiate and have an effect on principals support for teacher learning in PLCs.

Research Questions Addressed

The following research question guided this study:

How do principals in selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama support teacher learning for teachers who participate in PLCs?

The identification of themes and discussion throughout the paper addressed this question:

- Communication: Principals provided opportunities for teachers to communicate with the principal and other teachers in order to increase teacher learning in PLCs. Through the PLCs collaboration and trust between the principal and teacher had been established, therefore effective feedback from principal to teacher was evident in order for learning to take place.
- School culture: Principals and teachers discussed school culture as a significant factor in principal support for teacher learning in PLCs.
- Personal gains: Personal gains were an important component for principal supporting teacher learning in PLCs. Principals discussed that when they supported teachers in reflecting on their learning, being open about their learning and applying what they learned into practice, teacher learning took place in PLCs.
- Purpose and implementation: Principals discussed that learning for teachers in PLCs must have a purpose and the purpose must be supported by the principal to allow teachers to implement what they have learned into their classrooms.
- Structure and organization: The structure and organization of the PLC must be supported by the principal in order for teacher learning to take place.

The central research question was supported by the following sub-questions.

1. How do principals in Torchbearer schools identify learning goals in PLCs?

- Principals and teachers work together to determine the learning goals of the PLC. The principal provides teachers with student data to help guide the decision of the learning goal. Together the principal and the teachers look at strengths and weaknesses for the school as a whole and this helps determine the goals for the PLC.

2. What are the essential structures of PLCs that foster teacher learning at selected school sites?
    - PLCs at each site are structured to allow teachers opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other. PLCs in each site were structured differently. Some sites had grade level PLCs while other sites had subject topic PLCs. Participants from both structures felt the structure was best for their learning style.
3. What opportunities for feedback do principals provide for teachers in a PLC?
    - Principals and teachers discussed feedback as a key to teacher learning in PLCs. The teachers discussed providing principals with documentation of the learning taking place in their PLC. The principals discussed using this documentation to provide feedback to teachers about their learning. Many participants discussed opportunities for feedback from principals or other teachers during their PLC meetings.
4. How do principals determine that what teachers have learned in PLCs has an effect on classroom instruction?
    - Principals and teachers discussed looking at student data to determine if what teachers have learned in PLCs has been implemented in the classroom

successfully. If there is a positive change in the data, the participants felt that teacher learning was successful.

Summary

This research focused on three schools serving students in Kindergarten through sixth grade in Alabama Torchbearer Schools with PLCs in place for at least one year. Using a qualitative research design, I was able to explore and discover how principals supported teacher learning in PLCs. My research findings suggest that principal support for teacher learning in PLCs occurs when there is support for communication, school culture, personal gains, purpose and implementation, and structure and organization. Teacher learning takes place when principals support teachers in finding resources to learn more in depth content to have an impact on student learning (DuFour, 2005; Lumpe, 2007; Nelson, et al., 2010).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

School districts throughout the United States are discussing the importance of teacher learning in PLCs (Ermeling & Gallimore, 2013). Principals are under increased pressure to provide high quality teacher professional development in their schools (Bruce et al., 2010; Sayers et al., 2014; Terehoff, 2002). Therefore, the PLC model for delivering professional development to teachers has become an avenue for principals to provide meaningful professional development for teachers. There is a plethora of research that supports the benefits of PLCs improving student achievement (DuFour et al., 2006; Lumpe, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2009; Garrett, 2010; Nelson et al., 2010). Teacher learning is a component of PLCs that contributes to improved teacher instruction and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Weathers, 2009). Furthermore, there are numerous learning opportunities for educators who participate in PLCs (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006); however, there is a paucity of research exploring principals support for teacher learning in PLCs.

The current study focused on how principals at three elementary Torchbearer Schools in Alabama supported teacher learning in PLCs. This multiple case study was conducted using qualitative research methods. Data analysis of interviews and collected artifacts revealed five major themes and 14 subthemes. This final chapter presents a summary of the study, summary of research findings, implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore principal support for teacher learning in the context of implementing the PLC model of school improvement in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. Each of the three research sites had implemented PLCs for a minimum of one year. Furthermore, all three research sites were an Alabama Torchbearer School. The reason I chose to study Torchbearer Schools, as opposed to other schools in Alabama, is due to their demonstrated ability to achieve high levels of student learning, as measured by the Alabama statewide system for academic assessment. I explored principal and teacher perceptions of principal behaviors that perceived to support teacher learning. I collected data from three Torchbearer Elementary Schools in Alabama. I interviewed the principals at each school to provide insight into their perception as to how they support teacher learning in PLCs. Next, I observed a PLC meeting at each school to discover what teachers were learning in PLCs. I followed up the PLC meetings with interviewing teachers at each site who lead PLCs to provide any clarification and insight into their perception of how principals support teacher learning in PLCs. The PLC teacher leaders in the focus groups provided me with a copy of their PLP and meeting minutes as artifacts of teacher learning. I analyzed the principal interviews, focus group interviews, meeting minutes, and PLP. I looked for common themes among the three sites.

As Creswell (2013) suggested, I included thick description, member checking, peer review, audit trail and triangulation, to ensure credibility of my findings. In order to verify the accuracy of the focus group meetings transcription I provided a copy of each transcription to a member of the focus group. Furthermore, I provided each principal with

a copy of the transcription of the principal interviews to verify accuracy. I worked with a colleague as a peer review, providing her with documentation and discussing my research throughout the research process.

Summary of Research Findings

Five major themes and various subthemes evolved from this qualitative multiple case study. Through the analysis of the data the following themes emerged: communication, school culture, personal gains, purpose and implementation, and structure and organization. I was able to answer the central research question: How do principals in selected Torchbearer Schools in Alabama support teacher learning for teachers who participate in PLCs?

I determined that communication between the principal and teachers participating in PLCs supports teacher learning. Principals and teachers suggested that school culture which is established by all stakeholders of the school, including the principal as the instructional leader, has an impact on teacher learning in PLCs. Furthermore, the principals in this study provided support for teachers' personal gains and individual professional development, in order for learning to be accomplished in PLCs. Principals felt structure and organization of the PLCs must provide opportunities for teachers to communicate to increase teacher learning.

The first sub-question: How do principals in Torchbearer schools identify learning goals in PLCs? Principals and teachers in this study discussed how they identified learning goals by focusing on test data and classroom observations to determine areas of weakness and strength. This information provided principals and teachers with a basis upon which to set learning goals in PLCs. Learning organizations that set high

but achievable academic goals are considered healthy learning organizations (Hoy, 1993; Erdem & Ucar, 2013). Principals in this study used student data to set high achievable goals for teachers, therefore providing a goal for learning in the PLCs.

The second sub-question: What are the essential structures of PLCs that foster teacher learning at selected school sites? I found that teachers must have opportunities to collaborate and learn from the principal and one another on a regular basis. The learning environment must possess a level of trust. Principals in this study supported teachers when strategies, which they learned in PLC meetings and which they tried to implement in the classroom, were not successful.

According to Ingvarson et al. (2005), in order to increase teacher learning and application of that learning, teachers must have the opportunity to talk and collaborate with their peers. Principals and teachers in this study felt that it was important to have structures in place where principals and teachers had opportunities to discuss their learning with each other.

Principals discussed the importance of teachers documenting their learning. Principals in this study had structures in place where teachers provided minutes of meetings documenting what learning was taking place. According to Eaker and Keating (2012), a highly effective principal sets specific norms and monitors learning to ensure that the learning team is directed and supported in learning. Principals in this study felt there must be structures and expectations in order for teacher learning to take place in PLCs.

The third sub-question: What opportunities for feedback do principals provide for teachers in a PLC? I discovered that principals allowed teachers to receive feedback

from the principal, but also from each other. Principals discussed the importance of teachers learning from each other and having opportunities to grow from each other. In one school, teachers videotaped themselves teaching and would bring the videos they had made of themselves using selected teaching strategies in their classroom. Other teachers in the PLC watched the videos and provided feedback to the teacher.

I found this to be a powerful tool as an opportunity for feedback to teachers in a PLC. In my opinion, when teachers have developed a trust with the principal and teachers in the PLC, and feel comfortable to video tape a lesson and share that lesson in the PLC meeting, authentic feedback and learning takes place. Teachers are not threatened of being judged for their teaching, but understands the videotaped lesson is a tool to provide opportunity for feedback and furthermore, a learning opportunity for the PLC.

Teacher learning should have a direct influence on the students they teach on a daily basis (Garrett, 2010; King, 2000). Principals in this study agreed with King and felt that teachers should provide evidence of applying their learning to classroom instruction that impacted students on a daily basis. Furthermore, feedback from this evidence provides opportunities for principals to support teacher learning in PLCs.

The final sub-question: How do principals determine what teachers have learned in PLCs has an effect on classroom instruction? Structures and organization of the PLCs allow principals an opportunity to determine what teachers have learned in the PLC and implemented into instruction. PLCs keep minutes of team meetings and reflect on the strategies discussed to help improve classroom instruction. Principals and teachers collaborate with one another to discuss strategies and successes.

According to Hord and Sommers (2008), teachers involved in PLCs gain higher levels of knowledge that has a direct impact on the students they teach. The principals and teachers in this study agreed with Hord and Sommers, feeling that the learning occurring in PLCs did have a direct impact on students in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this study I sought to address the central research question and supporting sub-questions. Five major themes emerged from the data: communication, school culture, personal gains, purpose and implementation, and structure and organization. These themes supported research from the theoretical framework and conceptual framework for this study.

Adult Learning

Andragogy is the theory of adult learning used as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Merriam (2001), "Andragogy reminds educators to engage adult learners in their learning and to create conducive learning environments that help them learn their best" (p. 5). Principals in this study provided teachers with a conducive learning environment and established structures to support teacher learning. Additionally, adult learners need to be actively involved in their own learning (Chan, 2010). Principals in this study worked with the teachers to set goals for teacher learning in the PLCs. Teachers were active participants in determining what learning would take place in the PLCs.

Organizational Learning

People learn together and are encouraged to become aware of their thought processes, they will use these norms and beliefs to develop a common strength and

capacity for working and creating together (Erdem & Ucar, 2013; Isaacs, 1993). Collaboration of principals and teachers to support teacher learning was evident in all three schools. Furthermore, healthy organizations for learning possess a characteristic of morale as a collective sense of openness and trust among faculty members (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). This study discovered that principals and teachers must be open and trust each other for learning to occur in PLCs.

PLCs

According to DuFour et al. (2010), PLCs are a group of educators working collaboratively in an ongoing process of action research to help instruction in the classroom. Each PLC in this study had established goals that focused on teacher learning. Participants in this study worked collaboratively, looking at research based strategies to help have an impact on classroom instruction.

Principal's role in a PLC should be to lead through shared vision and values rather than rules and procedures (DuFour, 1999). Principals in this study felt that rules and procedures must be in place in order for principals to support teacher learning. For example, the principals expected teachers to document their learning in PLC meeting minutes as a procedure for the PLCs.

Twenty-First Century Learners

According to Pearlman (2009), educational leaders are struggling to create schools and learning environments that serve the needs of 21st century students. Teachers discussed the importance of learning together to help the students they teach today. Principals in this study were supporting teachers' learning to have an impact

on the curriculum in the classroom, therefore having an impact on 21st century students.

Implications for Practice

While in the process of researching this topic I discovered that there was a limited amount of information and literature on how principals support teacher learning in PLCs (DuFour et al., 2010; Ermeling & Gallimore, 2013; Wei et al., 2009). There were several studies on PLCs that focused on school in general (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Wei et al., 2009). I chose elementary schools for this research study due to the fact that I personally serve as a principal in an elementary school. The goal for this study was to understand how principals support teacher learning in PLCs in Torchbearer schools. Although most of the teachers in this study had only been involved in PLCs for three years, they were knowledgeable and credible with their answers and discussions in the study. Therefore, this study helped me better understand the process of how principals support teacher learning in PLCs and all those who benefit from this phenomenon.

The data collected and analyzed throughout this study provided five common themes: communication, school culture, personal gains, purpose and implementation, and structure and organization. Principals from the three schools that participated in this study provided insight as to how they support teacher learning in PLCs. Throughout their discussions, and throughout many of the documents I reviewed, each theme arose as an important characteristic of principal support for teacher learning in PLCs.

Communication

Participants in this study expressed the importance of communication in order to support teacher learning in PLCs. Principals and teachers must build a trust for one another, understanding that teacher learning is a process that takes time. Principals must provide timely feedback and support for teacher learning. Teachers must learn from each other and communicate on a regular basis.

I recommend that school principals develop trust with teachers by spending time with teachers in their PLCs. Furthermore, I feel that the principal should be the lead learner in the building and communicate to teachers what the principal is learning. Additionally, the principals should have the willingness to provide timely feedback to support teacher learning in PLCs. Feedback that will validate teacher learning and or redirect teacher learning to the PLC goals.

School Culture

School culture is defined as the shared vision, values, norms and practices that unite a school, giving the school an identity and a way of operating on a daily basis (DuFour et al, 2010; Hoy et al, 1993). Principals and teachers in this study reported the importance of school culture as a critical aspect of principal supporting teacher learning in PLCs. Principals discussed the importance of an expectation of learning taking place in the PLCs. Teachers discussed a culture of collaboration and focusing on enhancing student engagement as a necessity for principals supporting teachers learning in PLCs. I recommend that principals and teachers develop a culture of shared vision and norms before implementing PLCs for teacher learning.

Personal Gains

Participants in this study suggested that personal gains were a contributing factor to principal support for teacher learning in PLCs. Principals and teachers felt that reflecting on their personal practice was important for learning to take place in the PLC. Teachers expressed the importance of principals allowing them to grow and learn at an appropriate rate for each individual. Principals felt it was important for teachers to apply their learning in PLCs to their personal PLP. I recommend that principals set expectations for teachers learning in PLCs, while, at the same time, being mindful the rate of learning may vary from teacher to teacher (Ermeling & Gallimore, 2013). Additionally, allowing teachers a degree of choice in what they wish to learn will indicate that the principal views teachers as professionals and trusts their judgment.

Purpose and Implementation

Principals and teachers in this study felt that the PLC must have a purpose in order for teacher learning to take place. Principals felt it was important to look at student data to determine goals for learning in the PLCs. Teachers felt that goal setting provided a focus for the PLC. I recommend that principals allow teachers to help with the analysis of student data in order for the goal-setting to become a collaborative process.

Structure and Organization

Participants in this study discussed the importance of how the principal structured and organized the PLC process to support teacher learning. Principals discussed challenges in structuring the PLC so that the group was cohesive and willing to learn

together. Another challenge discussed was allowing for time for teachers to work together, time for learning, processing, implementing, and determining if the implementation was successful. Principals and teachers felt it was important to allow time for teacher learning to be implemented in the classroom.

Principals set expectations that the PLCs would meet on a regular basis. Many of the PLCs met monthly, however some met quarterly with a minimum of four meetings per school year. Additionally, principals expected teachers to provide documentation for learning that was taking place in the PLCs. A particularly powerful example of documentation of teacher learning included videotaped classroom instruction to provide documentation of learning. Teacher learning was also documented in PLC meeting minutes.

Based upon the findings from the study, I recommend that principals set high expectations for teacher learning in PLCs. These expectations should be communicated frequently to all members of the PLC. Furthermore, principals should expect teachers to document their learning regularly through the use of these and other methods. This documentation will provide artifacts for teacher learning and help with setting future goals for the PLCs.

Limitations

This qualitative study focused on a small sample of participants which inherently has limitations; however, the findings from this study can provide principals with information in supporting teacher learning in PLCs. Other limitations such as forms of data collection and analysis existed in this study. It would have been helpful to observe more PLC meetings to gain an insight into the process of teacher learning and

how principals support this process. To maximize the data collection I could have had participants reflect on their experience in PLCs by keeping a journal. Another limitation was the sample. To increase the sampling I could have included more participants of PLCs. The limited number of participants could affect the results of the study. Increasing the time frame of this study to provide more interaction between myself and the participants would also have potentially enhanced study findings and conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on this topic could include how principals support student learning through participating in PLCs. Research could also expand to higher grade levels and compare the effectiveness of principals support for teacher learning in PLCs within each grade level or school. Test data could be tracked to compare the performance results of students whose teachers are participating in PLCs. Similarly, student performance could be tracked to compare schools that implement PLCs with those that do not. I also feel it would be interesting to research how district office personnel such as superintendents support principals learning in PLCs. PLCs are a very valuable tool for principals, and could be implemented as a model for professional development for all school systems.

Conclusion

The role of providing high quality professional development that has impact on student learning has landed on the principal's desk. No longer does an era exist where teachers are randomly choosing professional development, nor school district providing a one size fits all workshop for teachers to attend (Esmonde et al., 2010;

Hord, 2009; Terehoff, 2002). Principals are charged with the expectation to help teachers "develop insight, knowledge, and skills needed to become more effective classroom and school leaders and to demonstrate increases in student learning" (Terehoff, 2002, p. 65). The PLC model for delivering professional development has become a model principals employ to help meet this expectation (DuFour et al. 2007).

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore principal support for teacher learning in the context of implementing the PLC model of school improvement in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. I established that principals support teacher learning through communication, providing feedback and building trust. Furthermore, school culture, a culture of collaboration, teacher interaction, and enhancing student engagement, was paramount in principals supporting teacher learning in PLCs. The principal must support teachers personal gains while providing purpose and structure for the PLCs. As a result of this study, I recommend that further research be conducted on the role superintendents play in supporting principal learning in PLCs.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRIUTMENT EMAIL

October 29, 2014

Dear Superintendent:

The purpose of this letter is to invite a Torchbearer School from your system to participate in a qualitative research study: "Exploring Principals Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools." The IRB protocol number for this research is E130813002. The school will be purposefully selected to participate because of your membership and commitment to Professional Learning Communities at your school and because of your schools recent designation as a Torchbearer School. I am a graduate student enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It is my desire that the school participation in this study will enhance the practice of the principal at the school by gaining knowledge of principal's support for teacher learning and provide me with valuable information and insight.

The expected time frame for this study is October 2014 through January 2015. The principal will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will be scheduled at a time that is convenient to him or her. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. It will be audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. I am also requesting that the principal and teachers supply me with a copy of his or her 2014-2015 Professional Learning Plan (PLP) that they submitted to LEAD Alabama or Educate Alabama and a set of minutes/agendas from PLC meetings at the school site during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school terms. Furthermore, I would like to observe and audio record a PLC meeting at the school and conduct a follow up focus group interview with lead teachers participating in the PLC.

The interview responses, PLP document, and meeting minutes will be used solely to complete this study. The principal's identity and school's identity will remain confidential. All data will be kept in the possession of the researcher in a locked location. The participation in this study is strictly voluntary and the principal and teachers may withdraw at any time he or she chooses without consequences to you or your school. After the interview has been conducted, I will provide the principal and teachers that participate in the research a $10 Visa gift card. There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns, or complaints about the research, you may connect the UAB Institutional Review Board of Human Use (OIRB). UAB IRB can be contacted at 205-934-3789 or 1-855-860-3789. Regular hours for the office of IRB are 8:00 am to 5:00 pm CT, Monday through Friday. I would like to thank you in advance for your consideration and participation. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me via the email listed below. I look forward to hearing from you. Again thank you.

Sincerely,

Principal Researcher:

Joey Dawson (jpdawson@uab.edu) 256-443-1667

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL RECRUITMENT EMAIL

October 29, 2014

Dear Principals:

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study: "Exploring Principals Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools." The IRB protocol number for this research is E130813002. You were purposefully selected to participate because of your membership and commitment to Professional Learning Communities at your school and because of your schools recent designation as a Torchbearer School. I am a graduate student enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It is my desire that the school participation in this study will enhance the practice of the principal at the school by gaining knowledge of principal's support for teacher learning and provide me with valuable information and insight.

The expected time frame for this study is October 2014 through January 2015. If you agree to participate in the research you will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will be scheduled at a time that is convenient to you. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. It will be audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. I am also requesting that you supply me with a copy of your 2014-2015 Professional Learning Plan (PLP) that you submitted to LEAD Alabama and a set of minutes/agendas from PLC meetings at your school site during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school terms. Furthermore, I would like to observe and audio record a PLC meeting at the school and conduct a follow up focus group discussion the clarify any information with the teachers at your school that participating in the PLC. I will also requests the

focus group provide me with PLP from each teacher and a copy of minutes/agendas from PLC meetings at your school site during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school terms.

Your interview responses, PLP document, and meeting minutes will be used solely to complete this study. Your identity and your school's identity will remain confidential. All data will be kept in the possession of the researcher in a locked location. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time you chose without consequences to you or your school. After the interview has been conducted, I will provide you a $10 Visa gift card. There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns, or complaints about the research, you may connect the UAB Institutional Review Board of Human Use (OIRB). UAB IRB can be contacted at 205-934-3789 or 1-855-860-3789. Regular hours for the office of IRB are 8:00 am to 5:00 pm CT, Monday through Friday. I would like to thank you in advance for your consideration and participation. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me via the email listed below. I look forward to hearing from you. Again thank you.

Sincerely,

Principal Researcher:

Joey Dawson (jpdawson@uab.edu) 256-443-1667

APPENDIX C

TEACHER RECRUITMENT EMAIL

October 29, 2014

Dear Teacher:

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study: "Exploring Principals Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools." The IRB protocol number for this research is E130813002. You were purposefully selected to participate because of your membership and commitment to Professional Learning Communities at your school and because of your schools recent designation as a Torchbearer School. I am a graduate student enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It is my desire that the school participation in this study will enhance the practice of the teacher at the school by gaining knowledge of principal's support for teacher learning and provide me with valuable information and insight.

The expected time frame for this study is October 2014 through January 2015. If you agree to participate in the research you will be asked to participate in PLC meeting and follow-up group discussion that will be scheduled at a time that is convenient to you. The PLC meeting and observation will last 60 minutes. The focus group discussion will last approximately 45 minutes. The PLC meeting and focus group discussion will be audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis. I am also requesting that you supply me with a copy of your 2014-2015 Professional Learning Plan (PLP) that you submitted to Education Alabama and a set of minutes/agendas from PLC meetings at your school site during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school terms.

Your focus group discussion responses, PLC meeting interactions and responses, PLP document, and meeting minutes will be used solely to complete this study. Your identity and your school's identity will remain confidential. All data will be kept in the possession of the researcher in a locked location. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at any time you chose without consequences to you or your school. After the focus group discussion has been conducted, I will provide you a $10 Visa gift card. There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns, or complaints about the research, you may connect the UAB Institutional Review Board of Human Use (OIRB). UAB IRB can be contacted at 205-934-3789 or 1-855-860-3789. Regular hours for the office of IRB are 8:00 am to 5:00 pm CT, Monday through Friday. I would like to thank you in advance for your consideration and participation. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me via the email listed below. I look forward to hearing from you. Again thank you.

Sincerely,

Principal Researcher:

Joey Dawson (jpdawson@uab.edu) 256-443-1667

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Exploring Principal Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools

Time of interview: _____

Date of interview: _____

Place of interview: _____

Name of Researcher: _____

Name of Participant: _____

Participant's Title/Position __ _____

Introduction:

[Participant's name], first of all I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and talk with me today. Everything we say is on the record, unless you request otherwise during the interview. The purpose of this case study is to explore principal support for teacher learning in the context of implementing the PLCs model of school improvement in Torchbearer Schools in Alabama. Remember, from your permission, I am audio-taping as well as taking notes during our discussion today. At the conclusion of this interview, you will provide me with a pseudonym to use in order to protect your anonymity when referencing you in the study.

Questions:

Icebreaker # 1. Tell me about your educational and professional background?

Probe:

Years Taught

Grade Taught

Length of time PLCs have been established in their school

Background training and knowledge of PLCs

Icebreaker #2. Talk to me about becoming a Torchbearer School.

Probe:

What helped your school receive this recognition?

What contributes to the success of your school?

Other awards

Interview Questions for Principal interviews :

1. What behaviors do you think support teacher learning in your school? (Probe: implementation, principal follow-up, encouragement)

2. Please discuss how your PLC was developed. (Probe: District Mandate, Principal Directive, Colleague's Suggestion, Professional Development Idea)

3. Tell me about the structure of your PLC and the goals you have set as a group. (Probe: Grade Level, Content Area, Meeting Schedule, Goal Establishment)

4. How does participating in PLC help your teachers determine their personal learning goals? (Probe: Professional Development Ideas, Based on previous years test scores, Same as other teachers?)

5. What role does the principal play in determining the teachers learning goals? (Probe: recommendations by principal, conference with principal, no input from principal)

6. How does participating in your PLC affect the teacher's professional learning plan? (Probe: Are some goals set as a group?, Educate ALABAMA)

7. What specific topics have you discussed in your PLC? (Probe: High Stakes Test Data, Discipline Data, Differentiate Instruction, RTI, Explicit Instruction, Cooperative Learning)

8. What role does the principal play in picking the topics discussed in your PLC? (Probe: recommendations by principal, conference with principal, no input from principal)

9. How do you determine if what teachers are learning through PLC will have a positive impact on classroom instruction? (Probe: Comparison of test scores year to year, comparison of overall grades per subject area, periodic reviews in PLC meetings)

10. What characteristics of teacher learning are evident from participation in your PLC?

11. What else you would like to add regarding teacher learning through participation in PLCs?

Again, thank you for your participation in this study. Please be assured that your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

If needed, may I contact you in the next couple of weeks if I need to clarify anything?

Yes No

The pseudonym assigned to you when referencing you in the study?

_____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Interview Questions for Focus group discussion:

1. What behaviors do you think support teacher learning in your school? (Probe: implementation, principal follow-up, encouragement)

2. Tell me about the structure of your PLC and the goals you have set as a group. (Probe: Grade Level, Content Area, Meeting Schedule, Goal Establishment)

3. How does participating in PLC help your determine your personal learning goals? (Probe: Professional Development Ideas, Based on previous years test scores, Same as other teachers?)

4. What role does the principal play in determining your learning goals? (Probe: recommendations by principal, conference with principal, no input from principal)

5. How does participating in your PLC affect your professional learning plan? (Probe: Are some goals set as a group?, Educate ALABAMA)

6. How do you determine if what you are learning through PLC will have a positive impact on classroom instruction? (Probe: Comparison of test scores year to year, comparison of overall grades per subject area, periodic reviews in PLC meetings)

7. What else you would like to add regarding teacher learning through participation in PLCs?

Again, thank you for your participation in this study. Please be assured that your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

If needed, may I contact you in the next couple of weeks if I need to clarify anything?

Yes No

The pseudonym assigned to you when referencing you in the study?

_____

APPENDIX F

OBSERVATION DATA SHEET

Exploring Principal Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools

Time of observation: _____

Date of observation: _____

Place of observation: _____

Name of Researcher: _____

Name of Participants: _____

Participants Titles/Positions _____

How do princpals in Torchbear schools identify learning goals in PLCs?

Indicators:

- The use of data is part of the school's culture and is used to develop specific goals, change instruction in the classroom, and monitor achievement of all students.
- There is a system established in which changes in instruction is monitored.

What are the essential structures of PLCs that foster teacher learning at your school site?

Indicators:

- Research-based best practices are discussed.
- Staff has developed structures to discuss teacher learning.
- Structures provide evidence of teacher learning.

What opportunities for feedback do principals provide for teachers in a PLC?

Indicators:

- Teachers have time to collabortively discuss what is effective in the classroom.
- Instructional adjustments are made by teams as needed.

How do principals assess what teachers have learned to improve classroom instruction?

Indicators:

- Classroom observations reveal that teacher learning is emphasized in classroom teaching.

APPENDIX G

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

Institutional Review Board for Human Use

Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator:	DAWSON, JOSEPH P
Co-Investigator(s):	
Protocol Number:	**E130813002**
Protocol Title:	*Exploring Principal Support for Teacher Learning Through Professional Learning Communities in Torchbearer Schools*

The above project was reviewed on 3/28/14. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This project qualifies as an exemption as defined in 45CF46.101, paragraph 1,2.

This project received EXEMPT review.

IRB Approval Date: 3/28/14

Date IRB Approval Issued: 3/28/14

C. Oliver, CIP

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

Investigators please note:

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

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

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

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