Implementing transformational, professional learning communities in an urban elementary school: An autoethnographic case study

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IMPLEMENTING TRANSFORMATIONAL, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Seton Hall University

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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Doctoral Candidate, Yolanda Meadez, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the Ed.D. during this Spring Semester 2015.

D I S S E R T A T I O N C O M M I T T E E
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The mentor and any other committee members who wish to review revisions will sign and date this document only when revisions have been completed. Please return this form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and submit a copy with your final dissertation to be bound as page number two.
Abstract

This autoethnographic study examined the transformational growth and development over a four-year period of professional learning communities (PLCs) at an urban elementary school in New Jersey. I sought to uncover the relationship between the principal’s leadership behaviors, vision, and systemic planning and the development of transformational professional learning communities (PLCs) at the school. Ongoing surveys and questionnaires were distributed to teachers at the school, and my personal journal entries that maintained anecdotal notes of PLCs and interaction among staff during the four-year period along with PLC documents were analyzed. The findings from the study revealed that overall there is a strong relationship between principals' leadership practices and the transformational development of professional learning communities. Additionally, the results from this study suggest that the combination of all the leadership practices associated with this study can assist in informing school principals of the leadership practices associated with successful professional learning communities. Further, the results from this study can be used to help guide professional development programs for education leaders relative to the specific leadership practices that may help support a collaborative culture of professional learning communities in schools.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ..................................................................................................... vi
List of Tables .......................................................................................................... ix

## CHAPTER 1. THE PROBLEM AND PROCEDURE

Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................. 5
Statement of the Problem ......................................................................................... 6
Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................ 9
Significance of the Study ......................................................................................... 11
Research Questions ................................................................................................. 11
Limitations ............................................................................................................... 12
Delimitations ............................................................................................................ 13
Methodology ........................................................................................................... 14
Significant Terminology ......................................................................................... 16

## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Search Methodology ................................................................................................. 23
Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Literature .................................................. 23
Introduction ............................................................................................................. 24
Professional Learning Communities ......................................................................... 25
  History of PLCs ..................................................................................................... 25
  Scholarly Definitions of Professional Learning Communities .......................... 26
  PLCs as the Vehicle for School Improvement ..................................................... 29
  The Upsurge of Professional Learning Communities ........................................... 31
Evidence of PLCs Lack of Effectiveness in Schools .............................................. 34
Essential Characteristics for Transformational PLCs .......................................... 38
Hord's Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community (1997) ............... 39
  Shared Beliefs, Vision and Values ........................................................................ 39
  Shared and Supportive Leadership ...................................................................... 40
  Collective Learning and its Application ............................................................... 41
  Supportive Conditions .......................................................................................... 42
  Shared Practices .................................................................................................. 43
The Role of Shared and Senior Leadership in Transformational PLCs ................... 44
  Shared Leadership .............................................................................................. 44
  Senior Leadership/The Principal ....................................................................... 47
Summary ................................................................................................................... 50
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources and Collections</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC Documents</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys and Questionnaires</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Surveys and Questionnaires Used</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autoethnographic Approach</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Bias and Limitations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 – Findings</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC Compliant Years (2008-2009)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Years (2009-2011)</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Factors</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned Treatment</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Start of PLC Transformation (2011-2012)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation amongst Teacher Leaders</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation within PLCs</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifference towards Transformation</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation within the School</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Policy</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A – District Consent Letter..................................................148
Appendix B – Surveys........................................................................149
Appendix C – Survey Permission..........................................................178
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are the initiative or measure that many schools across the country have chosen to implement in order to address education reform issues. Over the past two decades, concerns over student achievement, primarily for disadvantaged students, has driven legislation to raise school accountability. During the 1990s, state governments took control of local districts, increased education funding was provided for disadvantaged districts, and most importantly, the federal mandate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), drove national reform initiatives that attempted to change the landscape of education. Today, professional learning communities are continually selected to address the above mentioned education dilemmas.

The professional learning community (PLC) model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts (Marzano, 2003). A PLC is a group of educators who meet regularly, share expertise, and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. Hord (1997) provides defining characteristics of PLCs so that not only the structures for group interaction are included, but also five operational characteristics for schools to put in place when assembling a positive and meaningful PLC structure are identified. According to Hord, effective PLC operational characteristics are the following:

- Supportive and shared leadership
- Shared values and vision
- Collective learning and the application of that learning
- Shared practice
• Supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community

A study of the best school systems in the world, based on student achievement, found that schools in those systems focused on providing “high-quality, collaborative, job-focused professional development” characteristic of “professional learning communities” in which teachers work together to help one another improve classroom practice (Barber & Mourshed, 2009, p. 30). A comprehensive study by Hattie, (2009) of factors affecting schooling concluded that the most powerful strategy for helping students learn at higher levels was ensuring that teachers work collaboratively in teams to establish the essential learning all students must acquire, to gather evidence of student learning through an ongoing assessment process, and to use the evidence of student learning to discuss, evaluate, plan, and improve their instruction. Furthermore, Hord’s (2007) review of contemporary research studies pertaining to staff outcomes reveals that participants report diminished feelings of isolation and increased inclination toward collegiality and collaboration after participating in an effective PLC model.

Stroll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) confirm these characteristics of PLCs in their review of the literature and identify three other characteristics as significant when assembling a positive PLC structure: mutual trust: inclusive school-wide membership, and networks and partnerships that look beyond the school for sources of learning. In the school reform literature, Little (1993), Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995), and McLaughlin (2001) also mention many of the same characteristics referenced by Hord (2007) and Stoll et al. (2006) but add reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, professional growth, and mutual support and mutual obligation as other important themes for developing PLCs focused on school improvement.
In exploring how learning communities operate at the district level, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2004) study describes its work with PLCs for the purpose of improving professional culture within a school district. It is noted that implementation of a district-wide approach has engaged educators at all levels in collective, consistent, and context-specific learning to address inequities, and improve results for all students. The study provides evidence for the efficacy of PLCs in improving professional culture, and offers a detailed explanation of the activities of PLCs and their development. The study cites the importance of attending to issues of trust and equity, collaborating, developing distributed leadership capacity, improving documentation, and ensuring focus on instruction.

The literature on PLCs also points to the importance of workplace learning, where learning takes place in the context of problem solving and occurs in both structured meetings and informal peer-to-peer interactions. Smith (2003) notes that the presence of technology builds opportunities for new modes and offers flexible delivery systems in the context of workplace learning. Wood (2007) cites the active participation of teachers in the development and sharing of knowledge in PLCs. She notes that collegial dialogue, provided in the PLC structure, is an opportunity to rekindle a “Deweyan approach,” utilizing collective inquiry through systematic observation and analysis of classrooms as the basis of professional learning.

Bryk and colleagues (1999, p. 754) suggest that “when internal socialization routines are working properly, they should provide a self-renewal mechanism for professional communities.” In research titled “The Energy of Change,” he states that the longitudinal sustainability of PLC structure can only be achieved with strong systems in the district and school level that can support staff, leadership, and unforeseen changes impacting a school’s overall performance. Changes in senior leadership of schools appears to be a factor; increasing
attention is being paid to the potential of leadership succession planning to help promote sustainability (Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). A longitudinal study of change over time in Canada and the United States, from the perspective of staff working in eight secondary schools in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, suggests that sustaining change requires sustaining deep learning, involving a broad range of people in “chains of influence,” spreading improvements beyond individual schools, using existing resources rather than special projects where funding often dries up, nourishing and taking care of people, sharing responsibility, active engagement to secure outside support, and developing capacity that enables “people to adapt to, prosper, and learn from one another in their increasingly complex environment” (Hargreaves, 2005).

Wood (2007), in her portrait of two teachers’ learning communities, points to the importance of communication skills required for collaboration, such as facilitating meetings within a realistic time frame and building shared norms and values for discussing teaching practices and student learning. She also mentions various tools for structuring conversations; these included protocols for looking at student work, analyzing dilemmas of practice, and assessing the value of lessons.

The concept of a collaborative culture of a professional learning community is powerful, but like all powerful concepts, it can be applied ineffectively. Schools can create artificial, or simply “compliant,” rather than meaningful and relevant PLCs. PLCs can concentrate on matters unrelated to teaching and learning. For example, effective PLCs are sometimes simply measured by how well teachers interact with one another; when the greater priority should be how their interaction produces student growth. Additionally, administrators can micro-manage the process in ways that do not build a collective capacity, or they can
attempt to hold teams accountable for collaborating while failing to provide the time, support, parameters, resources, and clarity that are crucial to the success of teams.

As PLCs continue to be implemented in school settings, better-informed administrators will be able to make professional decisions about how to effectively put in place structures that promote distributive and shared leadership focused on collaboration, teacher capacity, sharing practices, school culture, and student academic growth. Although the above-mentioned research points to potential positive impacts in schools that implement PLCs, most schools have yet to reap the gains they had hoped to attain. In Dufour’s (2008) book titled Revisiting Professional Learning Communities, the author acknowledges PLC literature and research but questions why schools are not seeing gains in school performance in the last 20 years of implementation. Although there are other factors in establishing and maintaining an effective PLC, administrators and teacher leaders are the most important players. Their leadership will move PCLs from being compliant towards a collaborative culture inclusive of all stakeholders and increase lead teachers’ roles in having greater autonomy and shared leadership that ultimately impacts student performance, hence PLCs that are “transformational.”

**Conceptual Framework**

For this autoethnographic case study, the theory that guided this particular research was based on the premise that professional learning communities are present in schools but not implemented and/or executed effectively to show school-based results and buy-in from all stakeholders. Professional learning communities are present in many schools in name only and are limited only to providing structures, procedures, and/or other factors to make PLCs compliant. In some instances, some of the necessary structures are in place without moving towards a true shared leadership PLC model. This leads to the final theory that guided this
study: the assumption that teacher leaders and teachers want interdependence to share their expertise and collaborate with colleagues during PLCs in their decision making and ownership of PLCs. However, autonomy must be given and shared-leadership needs to be modeled by a school leader with a clear vision of what a professional learning community is.

Statement of the Problem

Administrators, teachers, and teacher leaders play a pivotal role in implementing an effective PLC structure that continues to transform how educators shift from a compliant nature to an intrinsic growth mindset in solving education dilemmas. As noted in the introductory section of the research, some of the key characteristics of an effective PLC are supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and maintaining the learning community. According to research, principals possess a critical role in the development and sustainability of professional learning communities, forging the conditions that give rise to the growth of such community practice (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996). Principals should work with staff to create structures to foster growth within PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008).

Through professional learning communities, teacher leaders have opportunities to increase their professional capacity with clear systems in place that delineate norms, protocols, purpose, focused outcomes, and the support of colleagues and administrators. Due to the dynamic changes in the U.S. education system, PLCs can be used to build a pathway to college and career readiness that is focused on improving not only teacher capacity but improving students’ learning in critical and creative thinking, problem solving and inquiry, and communication and collaboration. The sooner administrators and teachers have a clearly developed system for addressing current rigorous national education reforms; the more
prepared teachers will be in addressing their own professional growth, impacting student growth, and Common Core State Standard (CCSS) mastery.

In order for professional learning communities to transition from compliant to transformational, a solid consistent structure and distributive leadership are necessary. For example, members in PLCs can assume responsibilities during the absence of the teacher leader, which in turn builds confidence and professional capacity in grade-level focused areas, allowing PLC members to be an integral part of a solid collaborative structure that can support teachers, increase teacher capacity, and increase buy-in to the school’s vision and mission.

The intrinsic shift toward increasing and building an effective transformational PLC has been slow in making a difference in teachers’ and students’ overall performance due to external factors such as time, inconsistent structures, and new curriculum that prohibits collaboration. Teaching remains a largely isolated profession with few opportunities for teachers to learn together in the context of their work (Lortie, 1975; Little, 1990; Lieberman, 2000). Due to the constraints of districts’ and schools’ mandates, teachers often spend their preparation time on individual work or completing unnecessary required forms or templates. These practices are not adequate for building teacher capacity, addressing education focused dilemmas, or addressing student education needs or school policy. Examination of the education research literature on PLCs revealed a broad range, type, and history of published articles and studies. However, the research on PLCs is limited largely to an overview of PLC structures and descriptive case studies of individual programs, observations, and interviews. Similarly, the literature from practitioner publications, while noting a research basis for the implementation of PLCs, focuses on accounts of the processes and stages that occur along their initial stages of implementation.
A shift in how teachers plan and carry out instruction must emerge in order to improve teaching practice and student learning over time. Likewise, much of the literature on PLCs is grounded in theories that highlight the social nature of learning and detail practices through which teachers share and build their work. Given the extensive literature on learning, this study was appropriately narrowed to examine how to heighten teacher capacity in effective and meaningful PLCs.

The literature evaluating the effectiveness of learning communities is generally more descriptive than rigorous in its methods; however, the literature does provide insight into how PLCs are implemented and their possible outcomes. Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) examine the effectiveness of PLCs through a review of 11 studies focused on PLCs. In conducting the review, researchers found that the teaching culture and collaboration improved and teachers became more focused on student learning than prior to implementation of PLCs. In addition, the six studies that included students’ learning outcomes reported improved achievement scores over time, suggesting that PLCs can have system-wide change.

Given that the research-to-practice link has become central to demonstrating the effectiveness of education programs, further research is recommended by many of the studies that have been reviewed. In addition, development of tools and resources for strengthening and supporting PLCs is clearly needed. Based on the literature consulted, the research does not provide information that clearly outlines the process by which a school or a district can move away from merely assembling a PLC to the process that assures that the PLC will actually move towards sustained, authentic, transformational learning communities. This is evidenced in the Cohn and McCune (2007) research where passive and vocal resistance to implementation of change occurred, although compliance took place on a daily basis.
Furthermore, how PLCs can be assessed on an ongoing basis and evaluated both in terms of function and outcomes is an area that needs to be further investigated. Further investigation is required in what distinguishes good practice from nominal practice or mere compliance to transformational implementation of PLCs. This is what I sought to present and investigate in this auto-ethnographic case study.

**Purpose of the Study**

Having a PLC’s structure of teachers that are compliant and attend PLC meetings yet are not vested into the clearly outlined mission, vision, and core values of the school is a stumbling block to the success of PLCs. The need for more than the existence of meetings referred to as PLCs is necessary in order to move towards authentic, transformational PLCs. In authentic transformational PLCs, the role of teachers is heightened and members are engaged in communities of learning that seek to illuminate their successful experiences, and perceptions are essential to successful PLCs. Merely “having” and “doing” PLCs versus truly “being” a PLC is the process which I sought to outline in this case study. It is important to highlight the differences between a “compliant” and “transformational” PLC. The transformative shifts and processes involved in creating authentic communities of learning for teachers that are already involved in compliant PLCs are lacking in the research and was the process that I attempted to capture in my case study.

The existing research speaks specifically of the need and the “how-to” to develop the structures to create PLCs. Hord’s (2007) dimensions, Senge’s (1990) disciplines, Kruse & Louis’s (1994) school-based learning communities, Newman & Wehlage’s (1995) circles of support, and DuFour & Eaker’s (1998) work on professional learning communities speak clearly to essential elements necessary to provide a productive structure for PLCs. Their
research provides snapshots of success stories within PLCs. However, even their research is devoid of systemic processes and systems that schools can utilize in order for PLCs to be utilized as the main vehicle for teacher development, curriculum development, and collegial and cultural sustainability as a whole.

The purpose of this autoethnographic case study was to examine the evolution from mere compliance to transformation of the professional learning communities at an urban elementary school over the course of four years (2008-2012). The autoethnographic study also identifies the factors that influenced this shift over time, including the role of the principal. Little Bricks Elementary School (LBES) began its implementation of professional learning communities in 2004; and when I arrived in 2008 as the new principal, there was a great deal of evidence that PLCs were operational, or compliant, but not transformational. In other words, they were not effective in addressing the reform measures they were put in place to impact, such as evidence of increased teacher collaboration, a focus on student work, and seeing a positive momentum towards student achievement and growth outcomes.

Through this autoethnographic case study, pseudonyms are utilized to identify the school location, school name, and any individuals mentioned in order to prevent different perceptions of the school and guarantee individuals’ privacy. I examined the process of change that occurred throughout a four-year period at LBES and the efforts that were put in place in order to support the transformation towards effective PLCs.

This autoethnographic case study details systemic changes that were made during a four-year period in order to make the shift towards a collaborative culture inclusive of all stakeholders and increase teachers’ roles in having greater autonomy and shared leadership that
ultimately impacts student performance. The available research did not provide us with information or a “how-to” for schools to move from existing compliant structures to more meaningful PLCs. The existing research was not clear on how PLCs can practically move into these essential tenets of collaborative work once there are existing cultures of compliance that are accustomed to “doing” versus “being” PLCs. However, Little Bricks Elementary School provided us with a clear case study on how to move into being a transformational PLC once one has been engrained in the process of “doing” PLCs for many years simply out of compliance sake and moving into true communities of learning.

Significance of the Study

Professional learning communities are found throughout urban and suburban school learning environment structures. The information gathered via surveys and questionnaires, PLC documents, and journal entries from this autoethnographic study will help school administrators determine the factors affecting PLCs in order to increase school level performance. The study details the process of how the professional learning communities at Little Bricks Elementary School shifted from mere compliant teacher response to a mechanism utilized for school-wide reform.

Research Questions

1. How did the professional learning communities at LBES evolve over a four-year period of time (2008-2012)?

2. How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the development and implementation of professional learning communities over a four-year period of time (2008-2012)?
Limitations

The journal entries, field notes, questionnaires, and survey data have been analyzed in this research study. However, none were created nor collected for the purpose of being utilized in any dissertation. It must be noted that the researcher was the developer of the entries of the journals and the field notes. Also, it is through my perceptions and my life experiences that these events have been described. I have utilized my memory of events, which can be subjective and therefore detrimental to autoethnographic research. I have therefore striven to always triangulate and validate data as much as possible in order to corroborate my research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

It has also been my intention to focus on not simply telling a story, as I have attempted to do the important work of analyzing cultural data. Autoethnographic writing lends itself to self-narration which, in order to assure that I am not self-indulgent as I tell my story, I have attempted to remain focused and to stay true to the purpose of the research and interpretation of the cultural analysis (Coia & Taylor, 2006). This was done by constantly attempting to triangulate and validate my assumptions relevant to the data through the use of teacher responses from interviews, questionnaires, and through document and archival review.

Additionally, this autoethnographic study was limited, in terms of the following:

- The degree of precision and honesty of the participants’ responses to surveys and questionnaires
- School administrators and district and leadership roles influencing teacher leaders and teachers shifting towards increasing their professional learning community role and participation
Teacher leader resigning during the four-year autoethnographic study and introducing a new PLC teacher leader

District budget cuts hindering several positions at the school level. For example, the dissolving of literacy and math coaches at LBES.

Constant district initiatives and programs mandated to be implemented at the school level

Finally, the population for this study was limited to one school in a large public school district. Due to the nature of the research methodology, an autoethnographic study, LBES was chosen because, I, the researcher, was directly involved first hand in the development of professional learning communities during the four-year study. Generalization of the results to all the urban public schools in this district or other districts was limited; however, results may be evaluated on a reasonable basis.

Delimitations

This autoethnographic research did not evaluate the impact of PLCs’ effect on student academic achievement. Student results or achievement were not analyzed because the study’s focus was on the effectiveness of PLCs in building capacity in teacher leaders and teachers as they collaborate to meet school and student needs as a unit with shared decision-making and accountability. This research case study focused on urban public schools; therefore, suburban population was not analyzed or studied. Also, PLCs in LBES were not compared to other similar schools in the district or outside districts due to the methodology used in this research, autoethnographic methodology, and the researcher’s direct contact and influence with the population at the school.
Methodology

In order to understand Little Bricks Elementary School’s PLC process of change and the conditions necessary for its development from compliant to transformational, an autoethnographic case study was conducted from March 2008 until June 2012. Data were collected from the following essential sources: professional journal entries, questionnaires/surveys, and PLC document analysis.

The researcher’s professional journal entries served as the primary source of data. They contained information that addressed how PLCs evolved in LBES during the four-year period on the following aspects:

- Reflection on occurrences during PLC meetings
- PLC meeting notes
- Interaction among teachers (group dynamics)
- Reflection/perceptions on PLCs areas of growth
- Short and long term action steps for PLC improvement
- Researcher interaction with PLC teacher leader and members
- Reflection on PLC improvement
- PLC effectiveness
- PLC teacher leader (facilitator) and members ‘professional capacity

Data extracted that were aligned to areas related to the research were utilized to summarize my journal in the form of domains, such as the list above. The researcher’s autobiographical data were treated with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what was recalled, observed, and told. Through the summary of the professional journal entries, there was a clear indication of change in the following:
Teacher and stakeholder perception of the PLCs’ purpose and process

Culture and climate

More than just numbers, the journal provided a keen sense of what the researcher was feeling and seeing at the time that the events were unfolding.

The researcher created and used questionnaires from research-based authors discussed in Chapter 3 to gather information in identifying factors that played a role in fostering the development and implementation of professional learning communities. The information gathered from the questionnaires was focused on the following: teacher leader feedback, teacher perception on professional capacity, culture and climate, administrative support, increased PLC collaboration and interaction, PLC impact on student learning, and shared leadership/distributive leadership. These seven areas above are clearly explained and detailed in Chapter 3, for the four-year period that Little Bricks Elementary School was analyzed. The tools utilized for all surveys were research-based and have been tested for validity (Berhnadt, 2002; Luis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Phillips, 1996, 2003). The results from the questionnaire informed the researcher of the PLC progress made during the four-year period in the areas listed above and provided insight on the validity of perceptions and “next steps.”

Document analysis was utilized in assessing the artifacts collected on an ongoing basis. Items such as agendas, minutes, attendance sheets, summary of instructional student goals, and other documentation informed the researcher how PLCs evolved over the four-year period and how administrator support fostered the development of teacher leaders and PLC effectiveness. Other documents that teachers developed to support the transformation of PLCs were also analyzed in order to assess increased collaboration among teachers in PLCs.
Significant Terminology

For purposes of clarifying language throughout this study, the following definitions are provided:

AchieveNJ: AchieveNJ is the revised educator evaluation and support system proposed to the State Board of Education on March 6, 2013 for implementation throughout New Jersey in 2013-2014. The board adopted the system on September 11, 2013. AchieveNJ relies on multiple measures of performance to evaluate teachers. These measures include components of both student achievement and teacher practice. While all New Jersey teachers receive an annual summative evaluation rating of highly effective, effective, partially effective, or ineffective, the components used to determine these ratings vary depending on the grades and subjects that educators teach. The weighting of teacher evaluation components also vary based on whether teachers are in tested or non-tested grades and subjects. Student Growth Objectives (SGOs) are a component of AchieveNJ which are academic goals for groups of students that each teacher sets with his or her principal or supervisor at the start of the year. These academic goals should be aligned to standards and measured using high-quality assessments of various types, including locally developed tests, performance assessments, and portfolios. High-quality SGOs use multiple measures to determine the starting point of the students’ performance and are differentiated to be ambitious and achievable for all of the students included. Additionally, SGOs should include a significant proportion of the standards, course work, and group of students for which a teacher is responsible.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS): The goal of the Common Core State Standards is to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn so that teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are
designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that young people need for success in college and careers.

**Compliant PLC:** The goal of teachers in compliant PLCs is to complete the task at hand with little to no reflection on the impact on self, others, and students. The goal is to merely remain in the status quo. Individuals in this PLC often reject any substantive changes and action is driven solely to "get the job done." The focus is self interest versus student interest by completing what is asked with little to no attention to its effectiveness. Improvement made by self in order to benefit colleagues and students is seen as unnecessary or more than they should be expected to do. Basic functions such as providing teachers with meeting agendas and meeting times might be occurring; however, there is not a true vested collaborative tone among teachers with clear, shared vision of ultimate student success based on collaboration and teacher development.

**Interdependence:** The right amount of autonomy and collaboration that results in focus, learning together, and strong internal commitment to group accountability that serves teachers well in the face of external public accountability. Interdependence is a necessary aspect for successful transformational PLCs to be sustained.

**Professional Learning Community (PLC):** A gathering of educators whose primary goal is the commitment to collaborating continuously through processes of inquiry and action research in order to improve the achievement of students whom they serve (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). PLCs are a group of people sharing and critically probing their practices in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002) and operating as a collective enterprise (King & Newmann, 2001). Hord (1997, p. 1)
blends process and anticipated outcomes in defining a “professional community of learners” (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993) as one in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students’ benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993). PLCs, therefore, draw attention to the potential that a range of people based inside and outside a school can mutually enhance one another’s and students’ learning as well as school development. The overarching premise of PLCs is that they must ensure that students learn. There is an emphasis on ensuring that students are not simply being taught but are actually learning (DuFour, 2004). This emphasis on student learning is built upon a solid vision and mission upon which the school completely functions. PLCs also function in a culture of collaboration, whereby educators recognize that they must work together in order to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all (DuFour, 2004). Structures are purposefully built in schools that support purposeful PLCs in order to promote a collaborative culture that supports teachers working together in order to analyze and improve their classroom practice, work in teams, and engage in an ongoing cycle of questioning that promotes deep team learning. PLCs ultimately judge teacher effectiveness on the basis of actual results (DuFour, 2004). The routine work of teachers in PLCs is to work together to improve student achievement, constantly shifting student goals as data suggest improvement, or lack thereof (DuFour, 2004).
**Shared/Distributive Leadership:** Leadership that enables classroom teachers to extend within and beyond the classroom in a manner that influences other educators towards improved education practices (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). In a school that promotes shared leadership, the principal is not seen as all powerful and holding a power position which is unquestionable, making it difficult for the staff and teachers to be able to admit to professional development needs (Carmichael, 1982). Rather, Carmichael (1982) proposes that the notion of principal “omnicompetence” be “ditched” in favor of principals’ participation in professional development in schools that embrace shared leadership (Carmichael, 1982). Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggests that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners—“questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions” (p. 393) for the sake of school improvement. The traditional pattern that “teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage” is completely altered in a school that fosters shared leadership, and “there is no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute” (p. 393). This new relationship forged between administrators and teachers leads to a collegial leadership in the school that embraces shared leadership. All adults grow professionally and learn to view themselves as “all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school” (Hoerr, 1996, p. 381). A school whose staff is learning together and participating in decisions about its operation requires a principal who can let go of power and his or her own sense of leadership and thereby share it with the other adults in the school.

**SMART Goals:** A process of combining a focus on student results with the use of SMART (Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-based, and Time-bound) goals,
whereby teachers can help students meet and exceed standards. Goal-setting and monitoring at the classroom level which helps teachers improve and focus their instruction and can help students assume ownership of their learning. SMART goals have the potential to serve as an effective tool to monitor the meeting of school improvement targets and can be utilized to support the school’s work and effort toward raising student achievement.

**Social Capital:** Refers to social obligations or connections that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships (Bourdieu, as cited in Smith, 2007 and Lin, 2000). Social capital was explored in this study because it involves relationships, norms, and trust, which are all critical when establishing a sense of community for teachers.

**Teacher Leader/Facilitator:** The term teacher-leader is commonly applied to teachers who have taken on leadership roles and additional professional responsibilities in the school. The teacher-leader concept is closely related to a leader that has been given a “voice” and granted the opportunity to take part in the school’s decision-making or “shared leadership” (the distribution of leadership roles and decision-making responsibilities beyond the administrative team in a district or school). In recent decades, schools have been restructuring traditional governance models and redefining leadership functions in ways that distribute decision-making authority more broadly and allow more teachers and other staff members to continue in their positions while also taking on more responsibility in the governance of a school. Specifically in this case study, there are references to teacher leaders being referred to as “facilitators,” as they “facilitate” PLCs. Teacher-leaders have come to have formal, officially recognized positions that
entail specific responsibilities and assignments. Thus, teacher-leaders/facilitators may continue to teach full-time, part-time, or not all, depending on the extent of their other responsibilities; and they may or may not receive additional financial compensation, benefits, a new title, or other incentives and recognition. In other words, the role and definition of a teacher-leader may vary widely from school to school. It should be noted that while the term teacher-leader is commonly used across the country, educators frequently create unique, homegrown vocabularies and titles when referring to these positions in their school.

**Transformational PLC:** Collaborative culture inclusive of all stakeholders that increases lead teachers’ roles in having greater autonomy and shared leadership that ultimately impacts student performance. It is how educators shift from a compliant nature to an intrinsic growth mindset in solving education dilemmas. The role of teachers is heightened and members are engaged in communities of learning that seek to illuminate their successful experiences and perceptions. Merely “having” and “doing” PLCs versus truly “being” PLCs is the process which I sought to outline in this study.

**Triangulate/Triangulation:** Triangulation of data is used in this autoethnographic case study in order to validate or indicate that two (or more) methods are used in order to check results. The idea is that one can be more confident with a result if different methods lead to the same result. Triangulation is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources. By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials, researchers can hope to overcome the weakness or intrinsic biases and problems that come from single method, single-observer, and single-theory studies. Simply stated, in this case study much of
the observed data were “triangulated” through the use of data gathered from questionnaires, surveys, and other forms of evidence in order to validate the data.

The processes of development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in an urban elementary school requires a great deal of “learning experiences” for all adults involved (Fullan, 2007, p. 85). This study focused on gathering data that pertain to the processes undertaken by the principal at an urban elementary school during a four-year period in order to impact the teaching and learning environment via Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at Little Bricks Elementary School. The study further explored how PLC systems are put in place in order to eliminate variations in practice by increasing consistency in improving classroom practice as the primary focus of PLCs.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Search Methodology

To gather existing literature on Professional Learning Communities, the following publications and databases were used: EBESCO host, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertation/Theses, and Internet search engines. The following keywords were utilized to locate articles: professional learning communities, PLC, teacher leaders, shared leadership, shared decision-making, climate and culture, visionary administrator, staff development, student outcomes, distributed leadership, building capacity, effective PLCs, ineffective PLCs, transformational PLCs, longitudinal research on PLCs, education studies on PLCs, and qualitative and quantitative research on PLCs. To present relevant information that adds to the existing literature, the researcher completed this literature review using the 12-item framework for scholarly literature reviews established by Boote and Beile (2005).

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Literature

In order to gain more content knowledge as well as an understanding of change over time in Professional Learning Communities, different perspectives were obtained through the review of peer reviewed journals, published books, chapter books, dissertations, and articles. Inclusion of the literature in this review was selected based on whether the research possessed a focus on the researcher’s key terminology with an added focus on sustained development of PLCs in schools. In order to capture this sustained development, longitudinal studies were important to capture. The longer the study had been conducted, the more useful it was to demonstrate whole school reform as well as sustained change over time. In the converse, the research that was excluded included any study that had a limited amount of focus on participants or scope of impact on the school, was short term, studies that did not provide some
aspect of student achievement, did not include as many of the focus areas and keywords listed, and most importantly, did not include some aspect of sustainability of PLCs after or as a result of the study.

**Introduction**

Background literature related to the implementation of transformational professional learning communities in urban public schools is examined in this chapter to provide a foundation for the research questions of this autoethnographic study. The research questions are as follows:

1. How did the professional learning communities at LBES evolve over a four-year period of time (2008-2012)?
2. How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities over a four-year period of time (2008-2012)?

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section emphasizes the history, structure, and purpose of implementing effective professional learning communities to address federal and state education reforms that increase school-wide results. The second section examines the lack of success in moving teachers in PLCs from a mindset of simple adherence and compliance to a more meaningful and vested stance. The third section examines the potential of professional learning communities ultimately moving schools’ instructional improvement plans forward and achieving transformational results as outlined in the literature.

The fourth section identifies the importance of senior leadership and the principle in distributing the “sharing decision-making” and “collegial support” in a transformational PLC.
Professional Learning Communities

History of PLCs

With the start of the twenty-first century and the enforcement into law of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the field of education has been challenged to endure great paradigm shifts on how they operate (Fullan, 2001; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Coming at a time of wide public concern about the state of education, the NCLB legislation set in place requirements that reached into virtually every public school in America. It expanded the federal role in education and took particular aim at improving the plight of disadvantaged students. At the core of the No Child Left Behind Act were a number of measures designed to achieve broad gains in student achievement and to hold states and schools more accountable for student progress. These measures represented significant changes to the education landscape (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) addressed the key issues of student achievement, school accountability, and school reform (Hanson, Burton, & Guam, 2006). Title I, Part F, Sections 1606 and 1608 of the No Child Left Behind Act included a component which requires school system grantees receiving federal funding to provide support for school activities that foster comprehensive school reform. Specifically, it addressed the improvement of student achievement through quality initiatives such as (a) developing school reform models, (b) engaging teachers and school leaders in the reform effort, and (c) promoting capacity building through ongoing professional development (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). As a result, many schools, particularly urban schools, were to take on whole school reform measures in order to discontinue initiatives that were obviously not working for their students and begin to look at new systems of change to revamp their reform initiatives, such as professional learning communities.
Schmoker’s (2006) book titled *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning* explains that professional learning communities (PLCs) have been accepted and acknowledged by educators as a reform approach that will provide substantial benefits for school-wide results. The premise of this school reform effort is to build professional capacity to address the dynamic challenges regarding student learning through ongoing collective professional learning (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002).

The desired effect of building capacity in the school setting is that the learning community can collectively address existing reforms and demands regarding student achievement, teacher performance, and accountability (Hord, 1997). One of the major tenets of a learning community in a school setting involves the collaboration among educators willing to share responsibilities in an effort to address challenges targeting student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Schmoker (2006) adds that this collective effort could eventually transform into a cultural characteristic of the school. In order for educators to fully capture an understanding and clear definition of Professional Learning Communities, it is essential to understand the structure and purpose of each element.

**Scholarly Definitions of Professional Learning Communities**

Providing a single definition that encapsulates a professional learning community is very difficult. This is due not only to the various definitions of the term professional learning community; it also reflects the varied values and perceptions individual school leaders hold regarding their schools’ reform efforts to establish a cohesive learning community. Schmoker (2006) indicates that PLCs are labeled everything from “communities of practice” to “self-managing teams” (p. 106). In Senge’s (1990) book titled *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, he utilizes tenets from the business world as he
describes a core characteristic of a learning community as “people continually expanding their capacity to create desired results” (p. 3). Senge’s perspective was applied to education with the qualification that the focus of the organization should be on learning, not simply on improving the infrastructure of the organization.

In exploring how professional learning communities operate successfully at the district level, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2004) described their work with PLCs for the purpose of improving professional culture within a school. They noted that implementation of a district-wide approach has engaged educators at all levels in collective, consistent, and context-specific learning to address inequities and improve results for all students. The authors provide evidence for the efficacy of PLCs in improving professional culture and offer a detailed explanation of the activities of PLCs and their development. They cite the importance of attending to issues of trust and equity, developing distributed leadership capacity, improving documentation, and ensuring focus on instruction. Furthermore, they observe that in many of the school-based teams that included grade-level groups that focused on developing lesson plans and assessments or multi-grade teams that collaborated on aligning curriculum and ensuring a coherent learning pathway across grade levels, there was a marked improvement in student performance by the end of the year. The research also shows that many of these schools that demonstrated student performance improvement also clearly had the support of a principal who validated the work of the teachers in PLCs. The teachers were allotted extended time to meet; teachers were allowed to meet at least an hour a week during the school day with a focus on examining student work and assessment results. In these schools, it is important to note that a teacher facilitator would usually push the group to probe for explanations and identify priorities for improving instructional activities and set objectives for action.
Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) examined the effectiveness of PLCs through a review of 11 studies focused on PLCs. Although they observed that “few studies moved beyond self-reports of positive impact” (p. 80) based upon their analysis of the studies identified, the researchers found evidence of change in teaching practice. Also noted was that this change included “some limited evidence that the impact is measurable beyond teacher perceptions” (p. 88). In conducting the review, researchers found that the teaching culture and collaboration improved and teachers became more focused on student learning than prior to implementation of PLCs. In addition, the six studies that included students’ learning outcomes reported improved achievement scores over time, suggesting that PLCs can have system-wide change.

Using a combined quantitative/qualitative design, Louis and Marks (1998) conducted a multi-site study of the impact of PLCs. These researchers focused on eight elementary schools, eight middle schools, and eight high schools. The studied schools were a nationally selected sample of restructuring schools. These researchers looked at both pedagogy and the social structure of the classrooms in examining teaching practice. In particular, through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, they documented the presence of the structural support for, and the characteristics of, authentic pedagogy, a term that is defined in their study. Authentic pedagogy is described as emphasis on higher order thinking, the construction of meaning through conversation, and the development of depth of knowledge that has value beyond the classroom. These researchers examined the connection between the quality of classroom pedagogy and the existence of the core characteristics of PLCs. Louis and Marks (1998) documented that the presence of professional learning communities in a school contributes to higher levels of social support for achievement and higher levels of authentic pedagogy. In fact, they note that their model accounts for 36% of the variance in the quality of
classroom pedagogy, providing robust support to demonstrate the impact of PLCs on
classroom practice.

Based on this comprehensive body of work, Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) outline
five elements of professional learning communities that produced a collective sense of
responsibility for student learning in schools: (a) shared norms and values, (b) collective focus
on student learning, (c) collaboration, (d) deprivatized practice, and (e) reflective dialogue.
They suggest that “school-wide professional community demands at least a minimal level of
each of these elements” (p. 760). They conclude that “while the cultural context arising from
school demographics is likely to prove important, Professional Learning Communities,
according to our hypothesis, are the primary influence on teacher responsibility for student
learning” (p. 771).

Hord’s framework (1997) is similar to the Louis, Marks, and Kruse framework. Hord
outlines five dimensions of professional learning communities: (a) supportive and shared
leadership, (b) collective creativity, (c) shared values and vision, (d) supportive conditions, and
(e) shared personal practice.

**PLCs as the Vehicle for School Improvement**

Federal mandates such as Title I and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which
became law in 2001, embed in their requirements for funding guidelines for how professional
development is carried out for teachers, particularly for faculty employed in schools classified
as “in need of improvement.” The question of how to adequately provide staff development to
teachers was at the core of many conversations at the time. Effective methods of collaboration
amongst teachers implementing proven principles and practices that would build capacity,
shared leadership and autonomy, and ultimately increased student achievement are the required
effective reform measures that effective PLCs can provide. However, traditional professional development models at the time relied on consultants to provide and “deliver” their expertise to teachers and senior leadership often in “one-shot” workshops (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). With new standards and rigorous expectations as a result of “NCLB,” the need for ongoing professional development on implementing PLCs in order for schools to sustain collaboration, shared leadership and data-based inquiry and decision making was essential for success (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997).

As a result, around the country there has been a great movement towards developing Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2001). The focus was to assure that professional collaboration increased among teachers. Professional development opportunities provided through PLCs were acknowledged as being essential to the process of school reform, innovation, and overall education improvement (DuFour, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 1997; National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 1999; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Sparks 2005). In Sparks’ chapter (2005) titled “Leading for Transformation in Teaching, Learning, and Relationships,” he states that there has been a continued push during the turn of the twenty-first century for funding towards professional learning communities as a response to reform and as a source of professional development for teachers to meet their professional needs and student improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

A focus of professional development was centered on how administrators incorporated basic structures for PLCs to exist as listed by Dufour (DuFour, 2001; DuFour & Fullan, 2013):

- Schedules to accommodate PLCs during the school day
- Strategically grouping teachers in vertical and horizontal learning communities
- Increasing buy-in amongst teachers towards collaboration by creating and/or editing the school’s vision, mission and core values
- Creating norms and protocols in order to create highly effective PLCs
- Shifting towards a model of shared leadership in the school decision-making structures and hierarchy

In support of Dufour’s structural tenets on the development of Professional Learning Communities, in their book *Turning Points*, Jackson and Davis (2000) emphasized that at the heart of PLC professional development are the following: teaching a curriculum grounded in standards, using instructional methods designed to prepare all students, preparing teachers for the grades they teach, organizing relationships for learning, providing a forum so that all staff members could govern democratically, providing a safe and healthy school environment and involving parents and communities in supporting learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

As a result, six practices translated these principles into action in each school. Within each area of practice, teacher teams (PLCs), a school leadership team, and faculty committees were to engage in collaborative work. The turning-point practices were: improving learning, teaching and assessment for all students; building leadership capacity and a professional collaborative culture; increasing data-based inquiry and decision making; creating a school culture to support high achievement and personal development; networking with like-minded schools; and developing district capacity to support school change (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

**The Upsurge of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

The *A Nation at Risk* report of 1983, the Goals 2000 initiative, and most recently the national shift to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2011) as the basis for high-stakes testing as of 2014 have continually increased pressure and accountability on educators to
improve student achievement. During the 1990s the standards movement called for large-scale reform across the country in curriculum instruction and assessment. The widely accepted assumption among scholars and policymakers continues to be that teachers as a whole are not prepared to handle the expectations that new standards demand of them (Fullan, 1991; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001; National Staff Development Council, 2001; National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 1999).

As the shift to a standards-based system that initially varied by state has now moved to a national system with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2011), the biggest demand on educators is possessing individual teacher capacity in content knowledge and pedagogy to successfully implement learning for students (Fullan, 1991). What teachers teach and expect of students is often a function of what they know about the subject matter and what they prefer to teach themselves. With the evolution of local state-based standards that require a large breadth of knowledge for teachers, the issue of teacher capacity is a struggle. Capacity in the area of content knowledge continues to be an issue for teachers, now compounded by the shift to the Common Core State Standards that are stating quite the opposite of how material is covered. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, in essence material is to be taught with the concept of going deeper with less breadth of material in order to attain student mastery (Common Core/Farkas Duffet Research Group. 2011). This requires a shift in teaching style, while still maintaining a need for teacher capacity in the content areas. The continual evolution of standards also requires that teachers have the ability to select lessons and learning activities that are appropriate and differentiate according to the learning needs of every student, utilizing techniques that address their learning styles (National Staff Development Council, 2001). Teachers are responsible for appropriately assessing students,
for pacing material based on assessments, and having the capacity to create material that is at an appropriate level of rigor for all students. Teachers are also held responsible for being able to conceptualize the growing amounts of data being produced, and they are now held accountable for disaggregating data in order to assess and meet the needs of individual students. This is compounded by teacher expectations to create learning objectives for each lesson that are aligned with standards, utilizing approaches that are developmentally appropriate and making sure that students’ affective needs and intellectual needs are met, all the while assuring that teachers are preparing students to graduate and enter two or four year post-secondary institutions. The question continues to be how are teachers prepared for these ongoing changes and what are the most effective staff development procedures for sustained learning and capacity. As stated in previous sections in this chapter, professional learning communities can provide the vehicle to address education issues such as supporting teacher instructional development and student mastery of Common Core State Standards. However, based on the current literature, there are few success stories that demonstrate sustained achievement.

The standards-based movement also has had the expectation that teachers will have the capacity to collaborate with other teachers for the ultimate benefit of improving student performance (NSDC, 2001). Personal mastery and teacher capacity are key in improving student performance. Although a teacher’s personal mastery is an essential “discipline,” Senge (1990) reminds us that, more than individual growth, professional learning must also focus on team learning if organizations are to improve. Rogers’ (1995) review of research suggests that innovation and system change will more than likely occur only when people are learning together, rather than in isolation (1995). As a result, there is continued confidence
from all stakeholders that Professional Learning Communities will yield results if implemented consistently and with fidelity.

Evidence of PLCs Lack of Effectiveness in Schools

The research is rich in providing practical steps for schools to implement the basic structures of PLCs. Unfortunately, many schools remain at the level of structural shifts and refer to this simple response to PLCs as a response to reform, and the nature of their ability to truly make breakthrough results is minimal. Therefore they remain at the level of compliance, and they are ultimately ineffective. These PLCs do not provide teachers with true collaboration, professional development, leadership opportunities, or focus on student work and outcomes. However, there is little research based on how schools have implemented the guiding principles which researchers such as Hord (1997) provide which can lead to a more transformational PLC and produce breakthrough results. There is a gap in the research in providing a clear view of how to systemically infuse and operationalize a system of change which includes the role of senior leadership and the role of teachers and teacher leaders sharing the leadership roles that lead the PLC shift into a transformational PLC over the course of time.

Much of the available research offers limited views or narrow breakthroughs as a result of professional learning communities that do not constitute transformational results leading to school-wide reform. In this autoethnographic case study, findings clearly demonstrate that the shift of PLCs from compliance to a maturity that brings forth transformation and effective breakthrough results for stakeholders is a process that is complex and involves systemic implementation and guiding principles that may extend research such as Hord’s (1997) but are not clearly delineated in the current available research.

Dunne et al. (2000) documented the findings of a two-year study on critical friends
groups commissioned by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. The researchers used interview and observation data to compare the practices of non-participants to the practices of teachers who participated in critical friends groups. The authors concluded that the practices of participants became more student-centered over time. They stated that participants increased the use of techniques such as added flexibility of classroom arrangements and changes in the pace of instruction to accommodate varying levels of student content mastery. However, the study was limited to suggest how to increase teacher capacity in a PLC environment after some degree of success.

McLaughlin and Talbert’s study of 16 high schools in Michigan and California which claimed to have established professional learning communities found that only three had met the criteria for being true PLCs (2001). Wells and Feun’s (2007) findings of six high schools that initiated learning communities concluded that the schools struggled when critical issues such as best practices and learning results were not the priority of the learning community (2007). Wells and Feun concluded that the schools were committed to establishing the mechanisms and framework for implanting the PLCs but admitted to not having a strong commitment to sustaining or expanding its capacity due to both internal and external conflicts (2007). It is therefore the responsibility of the leadership to develop capacity and thus shared leadership among the human capital that is in the school in order to develop and ensure that the PLC evolves into a true transformational PLC.

Englert and Tarrant (1995) studied changes in practice for three teachers within a learning community. One teacher in particular made substantive changes in her practice. Prior to her work with the learning community this teacher’s literacy instructional practices “consisted of discrete skill sheets or tasks that required students to read or write isolated words
and sentences” (p. 327). Through participation in the community this teacher implemented changes such as developing an author’s center with mixed age groups, implementing a new group story format, and utilizing choral reading strategies. Again, this is one success story which is meaningful; however, it does not demonstrate a widespread reform measure that this PLC impacted others, thus not leading to transformational PLCs.

Although the following two studies demonstrate more successful implementation at a pedagogical level, it does not delve into school-wide and ongoing capacity building for sustained, transformational results. In the Hollins et al. (2004) study, although initial teaching practices were not specifically described, the authors described how early meetings of the 12 participating teachers focused primarily on the challenges of trying to successfully teach low achieving African American students. They note that by the tenth meeting, the focus had become more about strategy as teachers designed a new “approach to language arts instruction that involved letter writing, a poetry project, and class books, and employed the writing process” (p. 258). As a part of this process teachers used strategies that included “visualization techniques” to help children understand their reading, manipulation of site words using flash cards, and different strategies for having the children change words to make new ones (p. 259).

A final example comes from one of the Strahan (2003) case studies of an elementary school where all of the teachers participated in efforts to improve student achievement in reading. This case study also does not document specific teaching practices prior to the attempted changes, but it does provide interview data from the principal regarding the initially negative attitudes of the teachers toward change. As a part of the change process teachers worked collaboratively to develop a shared school mission around four guiding values that included integrity, respect, discipline, and excellence (p. 133). The author concluded that this led to the development of
stronger instructional norms and made the teachers receptive to working with a curriculum facilitator in the areas of changing practices for guided reading, writing, and self-selected reading.

Wells and Feun (2007) indicated that the failure of most professional learning communities is evidenced when schools attempt to move beyond the initiation stage of their establishment. Wells and Feun suggest that this is due either to lack of the school leader’s understanding of PLC characteristics or a lack of investment in the school leader which is required in order to sustain the momentum. Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, (1999) found in their two-year case study of three rural schools that more often than not schools utilized a “metaphor” of what a PLC should be in order to guide the professional practice and therefore the PLC is in name only (1999, p. 130).

The research in this section provided examples of the difficulties with successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities. DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest that the stakeholder’s failure, particularly the school leader, to stay on track with a mission and to collectively be able to articulate what that vision is, is at the heart of the school’s failure to implement reform around professional learning communities. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) stated, “Many schools and districts that proudly proclaim they are Professional Learning Communities have shown little evidence of either understanding the core concepts or implementing the practices of PLCs” (p. 9). DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour cite three major challenges as schools attempt to establish PLCs at their sites. The first is orchestrating the development and application of uniform shared knowledge. The second is sustaining the effort and function of the PLC beyond the initiation state, and perhaps the most overwhelming of the tasks is the ongoing attempt to transform a school culture from an autonomous mindset to one
of shared values, shared leadership, and collaboration that will eventually result in a true, Professional Learning Community.

**Essential Characteristics for Transformational Professional Learning Communities**

Operating on the premise that a school’s reform efforts are solely focused on the mere creation of professional learning communities without profound meaning is a prescription for failure (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Various researchers have developed elements and characteristics that must be present in order for professional learning communities to exist. Hord (1997, 2004) identifies five core dimensions that are associated with a comprehensive professional learning community, including (a) shared beliefs, values, and visions, (b) shared and supportive leadership, (c) collective learning and its application, (d) supportive conditions, and (e) shared personal practice (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Learning Community Dimension</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shared Beliefs, Values and Vision</td>
<td>An undeviating focus on student learning that is used to guide teachers’ practices. The values and vision should be embraced by all stakeholders and collaboratively developed by the school organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shared and Supportive Leadership</td>
<td>School administration and teachers both lead the school through shared decision-making and collegial support. Professional growth is reciprocal between administration and teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collective Learning and its Application</td>
<td>The school community continuously and collaboratively engage in the inquiry process in order to apply new knowledge and carry out the vision of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Supportive Conditions</td>
<td>The physical conditions of the school and the human capital of those involved enable the function of a PLC to operate in a manner that is most beneficial. Additionally, both factors enhance student learning through the facilitation of PLCs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shared Practice</td>
<td>Teachers’ behavior and practice is reviewed by colleagues in a non–evaluative manner. The process is typically conducted through classroom visits. The purpose is to allow teachers to collaborate in order to share their expertise and knowledge with one another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hord’s Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community (1997)

Shared Beliefs, Vision, and Values

Hord (1997) stresses that at the core of professional learning communities is the process of developing and ascertaining a shared vision through a communal belief and value system centered on the premise of continued learning. Effective organizations can focus on the areas that are essential and on “reducing all of the challenges and dilemmas to simple ideas by focusing on what is essential and using the simple ideas as a frame of reference for all their decisions” (Collins, 2001, p. 91). The most effective leaders can focus on the big picture by “identifying the few crucial things that matter most right now and relentlessly communicating about those few things” (Pfeffer & Sutton, as cited in DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 156). Successful schools are those that are able to keep priorities, critical needs, and goals at the forefront of what they do on a daily basis, while empowering others through shared and supportive leadership.

Hord (1997) stresses that the core of the professional learning community is the process of developing and ascertaining a shared vision through a communal belief and value system centered on the premise of continued learning. At the heart of professional learning communities, as Sparks (1999) suggests, is the belief that PLCs should foster values that focus on promoting student learning while also fulfilling a teacher’s individual professional vision, thus creating a value system in the school that is centered on collective responsibility.

Shared values and vision is the foundation framework that sustains professional learning communities. Sharing vision goes far beyond agreeing that something is a good idea; it is an unrelenting focus on student learning (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Shared values and vision also leads to establishing norms of behavior among PLC participants. Having a shared vision sets the path and purpose for PLCs. According to DuFour et al. (2008), “The very essence of a
learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (p. 15).

Shared values and vision within PLCs is further described as “a synergy of efforts in which staff members are committed to principles each believes in and works toward implementing” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). There is a positive correlation between the degree to which teachers engage in learning communities and student achievement. According to Newmann (as cited in Brandt, 1995), the level of commitment amongst all individuals who are willing to “push for learning of high intellectual quality” is a leading factor to student success.

Hord (2004) suggests that a school vision should be reflective of all of the school’s stakeholders as they guide the decision-making, instructional, and management activities, as well as professional development. A shared vision in a school which is clearly articulated in the school’s mission will formulate a mental image that guides the organizational philosophy and action that follows it (Hord, 2004) and will therefore foster genuine commitment of all professional stakeholders as a result.

**Shared and Supportive Leadership**

Shared values and vision is the foundation of a PLC, whereas shared leadership and collaboration is the foundation of communities of practice. The collaborative effort between school administrators and teachers to share specific duties and responsibilities fuels the leadership capacity of the Professional Learning Community (Hord, 1997). Lambert (2003) defined leadership capacity as a “broad-based skillful participation in the work of leadership that exists among the appropriate stakeholders of a school (p. 4). Leadership capacity in the context of a PLC would be the supportive, collegial participation of principals and teachers sharing the authority and decisions pertinent to the school pursuing its quest to fulfill its vision (Hord, 1997).
The concept of school leadership within the context of a PLC’s vision and values requires a transfer from leader-centered to leadership capacity as well as shared leadership. This paradigm shift changes the view of the principal as the sole instructional leader-to-leader facilitator (InPraxis Group, 2006). Shared leadership through effective school leadership provides experiences to teachers to participate in leadership roles (Fullan, 2003). Fullan describes this transformation as “using capacity to build capacity” (p. vx). There is also the issue of collective efficacy as a motivator in shaping a school’s vision, values, and behaviors. Solansky (2008) suggests that when establishing shared leadership opportunities in a school in order to complete specific tasks or school goals, these tasks or goals significantly outperformed the goal outcomes that were completed by the single leader teams that were led by the principal or senior administrator.

The principal’s ability to foster and allow for shared leadership to exist and grow in the midst of the possibility that his or her level of decision making or authority will shift is a necessity for a Professional Learning Community to thrive (Hord, 2004). Hord and Sommers (2008) stated, “One of the defining characteristics of PLCs is that power, authority, and decision making are shared and encouraged” (p. 10). Hord acknowledged that transference to shared leadership is difficult for many principals and teachers. Huffman (2003) suggests that the capacity of teachers will be greater when they sense that their thoughts and work are meaningful. Therefore, principals are encouraged to participate in a democratic sharing of decision-making powers with teachers, providing them autonomy in an effort to promote shared leadership.

Collective Learning and Its Application

A major dimension essential to the success of Professional Learning Communities is
systemic, ongoing, professional learning of the school faculty (Hord & Sommers, 2008). This process must include protocols and norms for learning and procedures which at the heart facilitates the building of capacity among colleagues. Cowan (2003) suggests that the major catalyst for school improvement occurs when “collaboration to achieve shared goals becomes focused, intentional, and urgent” (p. 79). The key for collective learning to be a relevant attribute of a PLC is that the new knowledge gained and its application in the classroom must be affiliated with the school’s vision of targeting student learning (Hord, 1997).

The use of protocols or use of systemic models in professional learning communities are effective strategies for collective learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Printy, 2008).

The Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory (SEDL) developed a system referred to as the Professional Teaching Learning Model (PTLC) that provides schools with an ongoing and cyclic process for building capacity by engaging teachers in seeking new knowledge and professional reflection (2005a). The model consists of six phases performed in cycles: (1) study, (2) select, (3) plan, (4) implement, (5) analyze, and (6) adjust.

**Supportive Conditions**

Hord (1997) defined supportive conditions in the Professional Learning Community as the relationship between the individuals and the physical resources at hand. According to Hord (2004) the supportive conditions determine the when, where, and how a staff in a school building work. Cowan (2003) added that collegial relationships in the supportive conditions dimension require decision-making power, input into the school improvement plan, and systems actively in place, which will positively impact the professional learning community outcomes.
Hord (1997) describes structural conditions that lend themselves to being positive about and thus supportive of professional learning communities. These conditions usually have a great deal to do with the principal and senior administration. These include providing schedules that lend themselves to having planning time for PLCs to meet that are both vertical and horizontal, providing teams of PLCs to be devised that are both grade level or content-specific in order to allow for meaningful planning, allowing for teacher autonomy and decision making power through shared leadership opportunities for all teachers, specifically teacher leaders, facilitating collegial climate (Louis & Kruse, 1995), and being approachable and open to change (Hord, 1997). However, some of the conditions are structural and at times out of the control of the principal. Hord (1997) includes structural conditions such as the size of the school and lack of coverage for teachers, which does not allow for groups to meet together and does not allow the time or space for staff to meet together. It is suggested that collaboration between teachers, the school, and the district take place to remove these barriers (Cowan, 2003; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Shared Practices

Hord (2004) indicates that shared practices among teachers create learning environments conducive to building professional capacity through reciprocal collegial interactions. The process that fosters shared practices stems from the principal and senior leadership creating systems that allow for these best practices to take place and flourish. Hord acknowledges that in the development of a Professional Learning Community, shared practice is the last dimension that is established. Studies conducted in Louisiana by Leonard and Leonard (2001) suggest this to be true. They examined professional collaboration among teachers and indicated that although teachers were aware of the benefits and the protocols
required for engaging in shared practices and collegial collaboration and although they were in agreement with it, it was not taking place due to the following reasons: (a) systemic structure and size of the school, (b) time issues, (c) not aligned to the school’s culture or non-support from senior administration, and (d) teacher refusal to participate.

Hord (1997) indicates a critical component of shared practices among colleagues is feedback and intervention. The climate of “peer helping peer” should be absent of judgment and conducive to risk-taking and reflective on effectiveness. Huffman and Hipp (2003) found that only through repeated trial and experience could “shared practices” become a norm in the school culture. Once again, a paradigm shift from learning individually to learning collectively by working together must be a core value of the collective group.

In order to create an effective PLC, Hord delineates the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community (1997) discussed in this section. The next section discusses two key components that will move a PLC from compliant to transformational. A culture of shared leadership fostered by senior leadership that supports the continuous growth of PLCs is examined.

The Role of Shared and Senior Leadership in Transformational PLCs

Shared Leadership

Current education reform calls for more distributed leadership among school stakeholders (Fullan, 1994; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Opportunities for distributed leadership, also referred to as shared leadership, have come from shared decision making between teachers and administrators, teacher instructional groups, staff development, and curriculum development. Additionally, redesign initiatives such as teacher leader programs have created more growth opportunities for teacher leadership (Smylie & Denny, 1990).
There is a profound difference between being “just a teacher” and being a “teacher leader.” Robert Hampel conducted a four-year study in which he found that teacher leaders never constituted more than 25% of the faculty. Hampel explored 10 schools within the Coalition of Essential Schools and found that there are four distinct factions of teachers that emerge within schools: cynics, the sleepy people, the yes-but people, and the teacher leaders (as cited in Barth, 2001).

Definitions of teacher leadership vary. For example, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leadership as “leading within and beyond the classroom, identifying with and contributing to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influencing others toward improving education practice (p. 5). Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) stated that teacher leadership is the “capacity and commitment to contribute beyond one’s classroom” (p. 13). Crowthner and Olsen (1996) capture the essence of teacher leadership by defining it as “an ethical stance based upon the views of a better world and the power of teaching to shape meaningful systems. It manifests itself in actions that involve the wider school community and leads to the creation of ideas that will enhance the quality of life of the community in the long term” (p. 32). Literature places a heavy emphasis on the role and actions encompassed within the scope of teacher leadership, resulting in limited clarity of its actual definition.

Smylie and Denny (1990) examined the experiences of 13 teacher leaders in a school district to gain a better understanding of teacher leadership and organizational capacity. Their findings suggested that although the teachers were supported and knowledgeable about their classroom roles, there was a certain level of uncertainty about their roles within the organization. Such uncertainty was due to (1) unclear expectations from the principal regarding their role as a leader, (2) time constraints between classroom and leadership
responsibilities, (3) unclear understanding of how their role related to that of the principal, and
(4) role conflict and ambiguity of role. Smylie & Denny concluded that organizational factors,
such as those stated above, created tensions for teacher leaders. The difficulties for the
teachers in this particular study resided in the fact that they were trying to evoke change
through collaborative relationships but were faced with the bureaucratic norms of their schools
(Lieberman & Miller, 2004).

Professional learning communities facilitate teacher leadership by allowing teachers to
collaborate on their professional work, analyze student data, and assess student learning.
Additionally, providing common planning time, arranging the school schedule to facilitate
collaboration, and allowing teachers to work geographically close to one another within the
school building are methods to promote teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).
Through the use of PLCs, an additional perspective that addresses the challenges faced by
teacher leaders in terms of cultivating teacher leadership is distributed or shared leadership.
The distributed leadership/shared leadership perspective dissolves the notion of the school
principal as the sole leader. Instead, this conception is embedded in examining the collection
of leaders who influence “school based instructional practices” (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

Findings from a study by Beachum and Dentith (2004), which explored definitions of
teacher leadership from the perspective of various teachers who possessed leadership roles in
their schools, found that specific types of school structures and organizational patterns, shared
processes and identities, deliberate use of outside resources, and consistent, strong community
relationships were emergent characteristics that facilitated teacher leadership in schools.

Teacher leadership fosters changes in teaching cultures by maturing teacher authority,
granting teacher authority to make decisions regarding both the processes of their learning
communities and aspects of school governance. A specific example demonstrating the importance of teacher authority in the overall success of a Professional Learning Community came in a case study reported by Englert and Tarrant (1995). In this collaborative endeavor between three special education teachers and seven university researchers to provide “meaningful and beneficial” (p. 325) literacy instruction for students with mild disabilities, the researchers encouraged the teachers to take control of the curriculum. “Teachers were given leadership in their choices about curriculum development so that the power over the topics and change agenda might be shaped by the teachers’ concerns, interests, and questions” (p. 327) In the end, at least one teacher noted the significance of being given this authority when she spoke of how it transformed her sense of ownership over the curriculum.

At the beginning, I didn’t like that [parity] at all. I wanted Carol Sue to say, “Try this,” and “Do this.” And there was none of that…. Now I can see why that was a really good way of doing that because I feel that I’ve {speaker emphasis} done it, as opposed to taking somebody else’s [ideas]. Even though I’ve used hundreds of other people’s ideas and so forth, it’s still mine, you know (p. 335).

Senior Leadership/The Principal

Senior leadership plays a critical role in forging conditions that give rise to the growth of PLCs in schools (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Sparks, 2005; Hord, 1997). As Fullan suggests (1991), school leadership is about creating the best conditions for learning and creating collaborative cultures. Good leaders stimulate serious intellectual interaction around issues of reform and improvement. Paradoxically, they relinquish power through democratic decision making processes and exercising strong authoritative leadership in the articulation of organizational goals (Marks & Louis, 1999).
Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of research on school leadership. This led to the identification of 21 leadership responsibilities of school principals that are positively correlated with student achievement. The study’s authors suggest it is a rare individual who possesses the wide array of skills necessary to assume all responsibilities and do them well. In fact, a plan for effective school leadership includes “developing a strong leadership team that focuses school leadership from a single individual to a team of individuals and has as its core the crafting of a “purposeful community” (p. 99). Twelve of the 21 responsibilities should be distributed to the leadership team, the authors suggest.

Reeves (2006) suggests that the days of the heroic leader are over. Effective leaders today create a team with complementary strengths. The greatest challenge of the leader is not attaining perfection but “acknowledging imperfection and obtaining complementarities. Rather than developing what they lack, great leaders will magnify their own strengths and simultaneously create teams that do not mimic the leader but provide different and equally important strengths for the organization” (p. 23).

Zepeda (2004) conducted a case study that examined the work of a principal at a Midwestern urban elementary school. The principal used instructional supervision as a means of developing a professional learning community for adults. The study revealed that, while PLCs cannot exist without formal leadership that facilitates teacher growth, leadership solely by the principal is not enough. Rather, “the supervision that promoted the development of a community of learners at Plymouth Elementary School centered on changing leadership paradigms that lead to inquiry, generative problem solving, dialogue, and reflection” (p. 146).
Thompson, Gregg, and Niska (2004) conducted a mixed methods study of six middle schools, three urban and three suburban schools. The purpose of the study was to describe the relationships among PLCs, leadership, and student learning. Researchers postulated that true learning communities understand and practice the five disciplines of learning organizations, as outlined by Senge (1990). These disciplines include personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. They further theorized that leadership plays a significant role in the ability of a school to become a Professional Learning Community that enhances student learning.

Boyd and Hord (1994) conducted a case study of Cottonwood Creek School, a suburban PreK-5 school with 500 students and a teaching faculty of 36. The purpose of the study was to describe conditions and events that encouraged and supported its progress toward becoming a Professional Learning Community. Data were collected from 38 interviews of teachers, current and former school administrators, parents, university faculty, and central office staff. Hord’s five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community (1997) were used as the conceptual framework. The premises/propositions relative to leadership that the authors identified based on the research findings were as follows:

- In combination, an external force and an internal force can provide the support and guidance for development of a community of professional learners. In this case, the external force was a partnership with a university and the opportunity to pilot a new curriculum. The internal force was the leadership of the principal.
- The climate of democratic participation generated the energy and enthusiasm to reach shared goals. All constituents in this school—administrators, teachers, other staff, students, and parents—shared authority and decision making.
• The school’s administration must provide the schedules and structures for initiating and maintaining organizational learning and its application by the professionals in the school.

Schools involved in transformational PLCs function within the premise that fostering teacher empowerment and building capacity lead to a culture that promotes teacher autonomy and shared leadership. Elmore and Burney (1999) stated, “Good ideas come from talented people working together . . . ” (p. 272). The theme concludes in “shared expertise is the driver of instructional change . . . ” (p. 272), which is articulated through a school culture that fosters professional collegiality. Shared leadership is based on the idea that “expertise is widely distributed throughout a school rather than vested in an individual person or position” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 198). The shared leadership approach allows principals to cultivate the capacity of other’s throughout the school building to assume leadership roles and responsibilities.

More than mere involvement, transformational change is evidenced in instructional innovations when there is a commitment among teachers that have received true support via relevant professional development and empowerment in decision-making (Rosenholtz, 1989). Rosenholtz further identifies professional networking and collaboration among teachers and expanding of their decision-making ability as key areas that form the basis of the transformational change (1989). Fullan (1991) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that transition should allow for the phasing in of support and collaboration into the professional culture of the school.

Summary

McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) suggest that Professional Learning Communities have not been as successful as schools would want them to be because they require far more than the
mere expectation of running meetings with agendas and minutes on a weekly basis. They require “reculturing the profession” (p. 125). McLaughlin and Talbert suggest that in order to have a true learning community, there must be a paradigm shift in order for transformational change to occur. This shift would require a major philosophical shift, causing major changes in the manner in which norms are shaped and practices are altered (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). To do this and make these shifts in order to create transformational professional learning communities, intentional effort must be made in capitalizing on the diverse talents of individuals in a collective manner (Marks & Louis, 1999).

PLCs will flourish if they are allowed to undertake their natural tendency to develop into a democratic leadership (Hord, 2004). Much of the traditional views of school leadership are usually focused on the senior leadership traits and characteristics; more and more literature and evidence points to the efforts of all stakeholders as a major catalyst in transforming schools (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2004).

The majority of the literature reviewed advocates the creation of Professional Learning Communities. The literature promotes the PLC structure as a vehicle for increased reflection, collaboration, and collegiality, which are deemed necessary to meet the diverse and complex needs of 21st century learners. The preceding review of the literature and research has revealed successful efforts to improve the teaching and learning environment that includes a shared leadership model among administration and teachers, data-driven decision making, collaborative and collegial structured supported models for 21st century schools, which have been identified as professional learning communities.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

With the introduction of more rigorous standards, Common Core State Standards (CCSS 2010), there continues to be a heightened emphasis for teachers to come together to strengthen practices via professional learning communities (PLCs). This is compounded with states introducing laws that heighten accountability measures such as New Jersey’s new tenure law, AchieveNJ, in the areas of student growth outcomes and stringent focus on teacher pedagogy. As a result, as with any new education reforms and/or laws, PLCs are the driving mechanism for teachers to collaborate on improving teaching skills and the performance of students, but they need to be at a transformational, systemic level.

After 12 years of widespread implementation of PLCs across the country and as a result of clear common agreement amongst education leaders of their effectiveness, the research reviewed in Chapter 2 indicates that only a handful of schools have implemented PLCs effectively, though not at a breakthrough level. In Dufour and Fullan’s book titled *Culture Built to Last; Systemic PLCs at Work*, the authors stressed that the PLC process has become an “ongoing endeavor,” rather than its systemic intention to impact culture and schooling in a profound way (Dufour & Fullan, 2013). Considering the widespread lack of PLC effectiveness and successes in schools, the purpose of this autoethnographic case study was to capture the evolution of PLCs over the course of four years and to outline what processes were undertaken by the leader in order to accommodate those changes. As a result, the following research questions were created:

1. How did professional learning communities evolve over a four-year period (2008-2012) at Little Bricks Elementary School (LBES)?
2. How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the
development and implementation of professional learning communities over a four-
year period (2008-2012)?

Participants
Throughout the case study, pseudonyms were utilized to identify the school location,
school name, and any individuals mentioned. Little Bricks Elementary School, where the
study was conducted, is located in a large, racially diverse city in New Jersey. The school
district struggles with low, high school graduation rates and low standardized test scores. For
this autoethnographic study, Little Bricks Elementary School was selected to outline the
evolution of PLCs over the course of four years and what processes were undertaken by the
leader in order to accommodate those changes.

Little Bricks Elementary School has a population of approximately 600 students in
Grades PreK-4. Little Bricks Elementary School is located in the northern sector of the city.
The mobility rate in the school has ranged from 26% to 37% from 2010-2012. Eighty-seven
percent of the students are of Hispanic descent; and of those students, 39% receive bilingual
education services. Ten percent of the students are of African American descent, and the
remaining 3% are White and/or of Asian/other descent. Ninety-seven percent of students at
the school are eligible for free or reduced lunch (NJ DOE, State School Report Card, 2008-
2011).

As of 2012, Little Bricks Elementary School employed three administrators, 30 PreK-4
teachers, three ESL teachers, and two special education teachers. During those four years, a
varied number of support staff that included literacy, science, and math coaches as well as a
technology coordinator joined the staff. Since beginning my tenure as principal at Little Bricks
Elementary School in March 2008, I both observed and participated in the instructional
building capacity of teachers. This capacity building was specifically aimed at developing each grade level’s professional learning community’s PLCs. Table 1 outlines the structure of the LBES PLCs in 2012. At any given time, there were a total of five teacher leaders that served as leaders of the school’s PLCs. One teacher leader was assigned for each grade level or Professional Learning Community. Since the inception of PLCs at the school, there had been a PLC, which was referred to as the Professional Development Committee (PDC); this PLC was the learning community for all of the teacher leaders and was considered to be the leadership team of the school, meeting once a week.

Table 2

*PDC is a Vertical PLC which is facilitated by the principal and whose members serve as the Leadership Advisory Team for the school.
*The number of teachers in each grade level as well as the number of support staff varies from year to year based on student enrollment and budgetary constraints. The numbers represented on this table represent an average for the last four years.

In this chapter, I outline the questions guiding this inquiry, utilizing the qualitative methodology of autoethnography to address this study. This chapter includes a description of how data collections or mode of inquiry were taken from a range of qualitative research methods which included journal reflections, observations, and surveys. A clear description of
the site, and individuals that participated in the case study, limitations, and evidentiary warrant of findings are described and delineated by the researcher.

**Data Sources and Collection**

In order to better understand the operation and development of the professional learning communities (PLCs) at Little Bricks Elementary School over a four-year period (March 2008-June 2012), data were collected from the following essential sources: professional journal entries, questionnaires, and PLC document analysis.

The researcher’s professional journal entries served as the primary source of data. The journal contained information that addressed how PLCs evolved in LBES during the four-year period on the following aspects:

- Reflection on occurrences during PLC meetings
- PLC meeting notes
- Interaction among teachers (group dynamics)
- Reflection/perceptions on PLCs areas of growth
- Short- and long-term action steps for PLC improvement
- Researcher interaction with PLC teacher leader and members
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Reflection on PLC improvement
- PLC effectiveness
- PLC Teacher Leader (facilitator) and member’s professional capacity

Data extracted that were aligned to areas related to the research were utilized to summarize my journal in the form of domains, such as the list above. The researcher’s autobiographical data were treated with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect
cultural undertones of what was recalled, observed, and told. Through the summary of the professional journal entries, there was a clear indication of change in teacher and stakeholder perception of the PLCs’ purpose and process in order to impact culture and climate. The next section outlines the description of each data sources and collection in order to answer the research questions.

**PLC Documents**

Document analysis was utilized in assessing the artifacts collected on an ongoing basis and produced by teachers and the teacher leaders, serving as a direct reflection of their professional growth. Primary source document review in this research provided a clear method in order to triangulate the journal, interview and survey, and questionnaire findings (Denzin, 2003), which were a reliable means of corroboration, allowing me to be more confident of the study’s conclusions.

Items such as agendas, minutes, attendance sheets, summary of instructional student goals, and other documentation that teachers had created and completed were reviewed as a method of assessing teachers’ and, most specifically, teacher leaders’ developmental growth through the four years that I was conducting this study. Other documents that teachers developed to support the evolution of PLCs at the school throughout the four-year period of review were also analyzed. The primary goal was to assess overall teacher professional growth and measure developmental growth and increased effective collaboration in PLCs at Little Bricks Elementary School throughout the four-year period that was being explored.

Some of the documents analyzed included records of discussions and mentoring sessions conducted with teacher leaders. This occurred through a review of agendas, minutes, instructional goals, curriculum maps, and updated Student Specific Goal update sheets
(SMART Goals). Via the process of mentoring meetings, the principal and vice principals provided the teacher leaders with extended time whereby they were mentored. I reviewed, through the use of documents, what types of improvement had occurred in the professional learning communities and for teacher leaders and teachers individually as a result of reviewing their coaching documentation. I utilized the analysis of coaching sheets that were maintained between the teacher leaders and the administrators in order to provide data that attested to the change in PLCs during the four-year period that I was documenting.

Each teacher leader maintained the documents utilized for analysis of artifacts in a binder. The data included their agendas, sign-in sheets, minutes, SMART goals, curriculum maps, and copies of individual documents available for the purpose of ongoing review. This document review of teacher leader coaching sessions was accessible to me through notes that I had consistently maintained in my journal entries for the 2011-2012 school year and during monthly meetings which I held with vice principals and teachers. Meetings with vice principals were held in order to review their coaching sessions with teacher leaders. Monthly mentoring meetings with teacher leaders were also held to review their progress in leading PLCs. I provide a summary of these sessions in order to describe trends that describe the change process in the PLCs during the four-year period documented. I also present findings on how a rubric for PLC efficiency was consistently reviewed during these sessions. Teacher leaders were provided with an opportunity to rate the ongoing efficiency of PLCs as it related primarily to the documentation that was available and produced next steps towards progress.

**Surveys and Questionnaires**

Table 3 summarizes the surveys and questionnaires that were used to extract information during the 2008-2012 school years for the purpose of this autoethnographic case
study. Surveys and questionnaires were self-developed and/or adapted to assess and confirm perceptions and in order to inform next steps, such as PLC structure, PLC effectiveness, PLC leader/facilitator personal professional growth, climate and culture, needs assessment, staff development, leadership, and teacher development. Permission was granted by the developer for questionnaires that were not self-developed.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey / Questionnaire</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Who Participated in the survey / questionnaire?</th>
<th>When was it conducted?</th>
<th>What information does the survey assess?</th>
<th>Adopted from or self–developed by school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening Day Evaluation</td>
<td>Multiple Choice and Open-ended</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>9/1/2011</td>
<td>Based on the premise that the current Grade Level PLC setup was in transition and culture and climate was low, new expectations and goals rolled out &amp; new mission for the year.</td>
<td>Self-developed by School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level Facilitator Training Session</td>
<td>Multiple Choice and Open-ended</td>
<td>Grade Level Facilitators</td>
<td>12/9/2011</td>
<td>Survey was administered to collect information about how beneficial the information on the staff development for facilitators was and whether they could use information for their personal professional growth.</td>
<td>Self-developed by School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Development Session Evaluation</td>
<td>Multiple Choice and Open-ended</td>
<td>Teachers and Support Staff</td>
<td>1/25/2012</td>
<td>Assess the effectiveness of the staff development session: Provided feedback on areas that addressed PLC effectiveness.</td>
<td>Self-developed by School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Community Survey</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2/25/2012</td>
<td>Assessed how strong the PLC structure had become. Teachers assessed the Critical Elements, Human Resources and Structural Conditions of the PLC.</td>
<td>National School Reform Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Culture Triage Survey</td>
<td>Multiple Choice</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3/28/2012</td>
<td>Assessed Tasks completed in PLCs; the “health” of the school community.</td>
<td>Dr. Christopher R. Wagner (2002) Center for Improving School Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level Facilitator End of Year Questionnaires</td>
<td>Open-Ended</td>
<td>Grade Level Facilitators</td>
<td>5/28/2010; 6/14/2010; 5/13/2012</td>
<td>Assessed Grade Level Facilitator/Leader understanding of their responsibility and perceptions of climate and culture around PLC health. Also provided administration with information around their needs and supports</td>
<td>Self-developed by School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Surveys

The questionnaires utilized for the purpose of this study were administered to the five teacher leaders who were serving at the time they were administered (See Table 3). The implemented surveys were provided to all of the teaching staff at the school and included responses from teacher leaders. All of the questionnaire data studied were previously implemented at the school with the primary focus of reflecting on the instructional quality and culture and creating action plans based on survey results.

Surveys are considered beneficial in gaining insight into a sample of a population (Salant & Dillman, 1994, p. 4). For this research the surveys and questionnaires were a pertinent method to gather anonymous, personal opinions, perceptions, and commentary directly from the teachers involved during the four years that professional learning communities were being documented and observed. Survey and questionnaire responses were highly pertinent in the following ways:

- Supporting information from other sources regarding PLC trends in this research
- Supporting information about personal and professional development growth through PLCs
- Gaining individual opinions concerning the impact of changes of PLCs
- Acquiring general insight into the topic of changes in PLCs at LBES and their impact on individuals

All questions on surveys were multiple choice questions, hence closed questions with ordered choices. Questions such as these were less demanding for the respondents as well as being easier to code (Salant & Dillman, 1994, p. 82). Closed questions were developed to make the survey as simple and straight-forward as possible and to elicit a high response rate. The surveys were all conducted through the use of an online program called SurveyMonkey. This
program was selected as our collection method for three reasons: (1) it allowed for self-administration at any time, (2) it enabled rapid data collection, and (3) it met simple requirements for anonymity and security. The use of online surveys also allowed for a response rate of 95% to 100% on most of the surveys.

**Questionnaires**

Surveys were the preferred method of collecting data due to the simplicity of the process. However, it was difficult at times to ascertain true meaning from a multiple-choice set of answers. Allowing for detailed responses through questionnaires at times provided more telling and specific information. The questionnaires reviewed for the purpose of this research were administered only to the teacher leaders that served during the four years of this research review. The primary purpose of the *Teacher Leader Feedback Questionnaires* was to assess areas of growth needed for their specific professional development as facilitators. However, the questionnaires implemented from 2010 to 2012 to the teacher leaders were deeply rooted in their ability to address effective practices as they related to PLCs based on the research of DuFour (2004) and Hord (1997). The questionnaires were collected through the traditional paper-based methodology.

**Summary of Surveys and Questionnaires**

The Instructional Quality/Culture Surveys that were reviewed are primarily based on the work of Victoria Bernhardt (2002). Teacher Leader/Feedback Questionnaires were created as open-ended questionnaires in order to obtain clear feedback from the teacher leaders at the school. Their primary purpose was to assess the teacher leaders’ perceived preparedness for the work that they were to do as leaders and facilitators in the coming year. It also provided me and the other administrators in the school with an overview of areas where teachers
required support in order to help them lead PLCs more effectively. The questionnaires were also utilized as a means to compare growth and changes in patterns of teacher responses from year to year. Trends and patterns from the questionnaires and surveys were noted and action plans created as a result of the responses provided.

It was noted when summarizing trend data from the surveys and questionnaires that in some instances the Instructional Quality Surveys were focused on the perceptions and views of the entire teaching faculty, as it related solely to the growth and development of professional learning communities. In other instances the surveys were utilized to obtain perceptions as they related to overall culture and climate. In order to analyze PLC effectiveness the PLC survey based on The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools Survey Study was utilized and its results were summarized. This study, titled Teachers’ Professional Community in Restructuring Schools (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1994), has been utilized quite often to assess the meaningful interaction and collaboration among teachers and PLCs’ impact on student learning (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994).

In some instances an assessment of how tasks were completed in PLCs and the “health” of the school community, which this particular tool refers to as the “process and the relationship” of the teachers in the school, was the focus. In those instances I utilized the School Culture Triage Survey by Wagner (2002). This school-classroom culture audit has been conducted in more than 3,100 school culture assessments since 1981. Wagner (1996) has found compelling anecdotal evidence to suggest that the connection between school culture and student achievement is a reality and that culture influences everything that happens in a school (Phillips, 1996). Wagner has also found connections between school culture and staff member satisfaction, parent engagement, and community support. At Little Bricks
Elementary School, Wagner’s School Culture Triage Survey had been utilized in order to track the impact of school culture to shifts in higher collaboration and focused staff development through PLCs and increased shared leadership. I utilized the data from this survey to attempt to triangulate my findings in this study of a correlation between increases in positive school culture with an increase in positive outcomes as PLCs began to transform themselves into effective structures during the four-year period of this study.

**Journals**

Since my first visit to Little Bricks Elementary School on February 12, 2008, as the perspective principal, I documented, in a personal, professional journal, thousands of thoughts, anecdotes, quotes, and perceptions. Throughout my professional career I have maintained journals in order to capture ideas, thoughts, perceptions—both others and mine—and notions of things that need to be done immediately and as a future goal. I have a system of coding and decoding which I have devised in order to easily go back and track notes and important items that need revisiting. I at times simply used them as a method to collect professional artifacts that I would like to go back and think through. If someone says something that holds meaning to me, I write it down and come back in order to ponder it some more. These journal entries, bound in three volumes, provided a crucial, rich source of data for this study. The “spontaneous intimate diary” is stated by Philaretou and Allen (2006) as “one of the best sources of personal documents” (p. 67). They state that the intimate diary is “constructed under the immediate influence of an experience or soon after, they can be particularly effective in delving into a person’s moods, intrapsychic states of being, and most intimate thoughts and actions” (p. 68). Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) bring forth the argument of self-observation’s usefulness as it provides access to “covert, elusive, and/or personal experiences such as
cognitive processes, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted activities” (p. 3) and most importantly it brings to the forefront that which is often “. . . taken-for-granted, habituated, and/or unconscious manner that [they] . . . are unavailable for recall” (p. 4).

Throughout the four years documented in this study, I utilized my journals as a reflective tool. I took notes in meetings and wrote reflective notes. It became a habit for me to reflect on notes from meetings, whether they were PLC meetings, administrative meetings, or other types of professional meetings, and write narratives about what I had learned and what actions I needed to take moving forward. Normally, no more than three days go by without journal entries or reflections in my personal journal. I also incorporated journal writing into my personal life, which are separate journals. It has become a way of life for me.

For the purpose of this research, I analyzed my journal writing data and the meaning within the context of the research. Since the field data have been collected by means of participation, self-observation, and document reviews; I have continually verified data by triangulating sources and contents, analyzing and interpreting data to decipher the cultural meanings of events, behaviors, and thoughts. Throughout the process I have treated my autobiographical data with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what is recalled, observed, and told. At the end of a thorough self-examination within its cultural context, I gained a cultural understanding of self and others at Little Bricks Elementary School. I added autobiographical narratives in order to add live details and enhance understanding in this autoethnographic case study.
Methodology

Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography is defined by Reed-Danahay (1997, p. 7) as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. Reed-Danahay further states that autoethnography is a writing practice that contains extremely analytical, personalized accounts by which the autoethnographer will draw extensively from their experiences to extend understanding of a particular culture, discipline or phenomenon. It is a genre that suggests that writing about and through oneself can be done in a scholarly manner (Ellis, 1993; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I, as the autoethnographer in this study, looked within my personal experiences and cultural contexts (Holt, 2003; van Maanen, 1988, 1990). Autoethnography is an ethnographic inquiry that utilizes the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) include that there is no better way to study concepts than to study ourselves. Essentially, this study sought to provide details of PLCs during a four-year period at LBES and provide primary data on the senior leader’s role during that time.

In the traditional role of the ethnographer as researcher, Smith (2005) begrudges, we are forced to ignore our personal connections and experiences (p. 3). However, through autoethnography, I emphasized in this case study cultural analysis and interpretation of my behaviors, thoughts, and experiences in relation to the teachers as primary stakeholders of the school. Ellis & Bochner (2000) point out that through autoethnography, we “connect the personal to the cultural” (p. 739), through the use of the “self” (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This connection and use of the self was continually employed as I conducted this research of change in PLCs over a four-year period of time at Little Bricks Elementary School.
Autoethnography has been defined in varying manners by researchers in the field. Reed-Danahay (1997) states that some autoethnographers emphasize the research process (graphy), or the ethnos (culture), or the auto (self) when conducting research based on the autoethnographer’s focus, I, the researcher, utilized my personal experience or voice in a culture as a means to interpret how I see self/other interactions at Little Bricks Elementary School through an interpretation of my journal entries over a four-year period of time. Norman Denzin (1997) states that “the turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur” (p. 227) is a purity and richness that comes with autoethnography, which I hope has been captured in my research.

Shields (2000) also discusses autoethnography in the way that the researcher observes others’ performances or critiques data or others’ self-reports by the use of alternative forms of representations such as short stories, poems, and artistic interpretations (Smith, 2005, p. 4). As part of this research, aspects of all of the mentioned autoethnographic approaches were utilized. With a great deal of Norman Denzin’s modality of autoethnography, I reflected equally on the self and on the impact on the larger context of the school. I also utilized, as Shields (2000) and Smith (2005) discuss, a reflection and critique of others’ self-reports and interpretations through interviews, questionnaires, document and archival review, and survey data in order to validate my research findings.

Shields (2000, p. 393) refers to self-reflection as a major component of autoethnography. Therefore, as Ellis & Bochner (2000) observe, autoethnographic texts are more often than not written in the first person. Throughout this dissertation, therefore, there is
evidence of writing dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as I relate my “self” to individuals, the school, and other constituents that impact my story within the social constraints of the cultural realm of my research as the cultural insider (Hayano, 1979). A clear limitation was that a great portion of this research was based on my personal experiences. As a result, the major concerns with this research and autoethnography as a whole are validity and rigor (Holt, 2003). I continually attempted to triangulate my personal findings with teachers’ perceptions throughout the four-year period at Little Bricks Elementary School. According to authors Scale & Silverman (1997), the primary goal of any qualitative researcher is to “gather an ‘authentic’ understanding of people’s experiences” (p. 380). They offer these recommendations to autoethnographic researchers in order to increase validity, which I attempted to follow: (1) supporting generalizations with as many statistics or quantifiable events whenever possible in order to give credence to stated events that are unusual, (2) utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to support any conclusions or assumptions that are made, and (3) utilizing software to support data analysis that is qualitative to warrant analysis of representational data (p. 380). Carolyn Ellis (1997) argues that “autoethnography is scholarship” and that it is important to note that “to understand self [is to understand] others.” Ellis argues that stories should be considered fact if a reader believes they are credible, true, and authentic (1997). Therefore, my strong focus was on triangulating data through my personal journal entries, teacher surveys, questionnaires, document and archival review, and teacher leader questionnaires.

**Researcher Bias and Limitations**

The journal entries, my field notes, questionnaires, and survey data were analyzed in this research study. However, none were created nor collected for the purpose of being utilized
in any dissertation. It must be noted that the researcher was the developer of the entries of the journals and the field notes. Also, it is through my perceptions and my life experiences that these events were described. I utilized my memory of events which, similar to subjectivity, can be detrimental to autoethnographic research. I therefore strived always to triangulate and validate data as much as possible in order to corroborate my research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

It was also my intention to focus on not simply telling a story, as I attempted to do the important work of analyzing cultural data. Autoethnographic writing lends itself to self-narration; therefore, I attempted to remain focused and stay true to the purpose of the research and interpretation of the cultural analysis (Coia & Taylor, 2006). This was done by constantly attempting to triangulate and validate my assumptions of data through the use of teacher responses from interviews, questionnaires, and through document and archival review.

**Summary**

Federal mandates and the diverse complex needs of 21st century learners have prompted members of the education community to investigate all facets of education, including the professional development practices of teachers. The current research pertaining to PLC efficacy which promotes results-driven professional development that facilitate changes in the process, context, and content of teaching and learning practices is scant; therefore, this study took an in-depth look at the development and implementation of professional learning communities in an urban elementary school during a four-year period and studied the role of the principal as the PLCs evolved during that time period. The study provides a greater depth of knowledge to the education community. It was structured to supply the basis for an autoethnographic case study that contributes to the existing research concerning systems
change models that impact school-wide professional development and demonstrate how collaboration and collegiality that is facilitated within them influences the outcomes of a school.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

For this study, several data sources were utilized, such as professional journal entries, questionnaires, and PLC document analysis to better understand the operation and development of the professional learning communities (PLCs) at Little Bricks Elementary School over a four-year period. The purpose of the study was to investigate certain variables and factors related to the systemic processes and important individuals within the school impacting the PLCs’ move towards transformation. This study is autoethnographic, focused on elementary teachers from Pre-K to fourth grade in the school where I am the principal.

I collected an extensive amount of reflective notes and qualitative data throughout the four-year study in order to adequately describe the sample population and the shift from PLC compliance to transformation. The results of this study can contribute to the existing research, which focuses on systems change models that impact school-wide professional development and demonstrate how collaboration and collegiality that is facilitated within them influence the outcomes of a school and address education reforms. Growth areas, struggles, successes, and relationships between teachers, coaches, teacher leaders, and administrators in a public elementary school in an urban district in Little Bricks, New Jersey, were examined throughout the four-year study (2008-2012).

In 2008, teachers and coaches were provided with one 50-minute planning period per week, in which their grade level team (K-4) would meet as a professional learning community (PLC). The meetings took place during the final period of the day, which began at 2:05 and ended at 2:55. The table below shows the PLC structure at the beginning of my tenure as principal.
Table 4

*PLC Structure in 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)</th>
<th># of Teachers</th>
<th># of Support Staff, Coach, Teacher Leader</th>
<th>Day and Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Monday @ 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tuesday @ 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wednesday @ 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Thursday @ 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Friday @ 2pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Professional Development Committee (PDC)</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thursday @ 10:30am</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter conveys how professional learning communities evolved as I evolved through the phases of my journey as an administrator. It reveals the PLC structure at the beginning of my tenure as a principal at Little Brick Elementary School, external factors that influenced change, my actions as a practitioner, and my findings about the PLC practices, values, and purpose. I delve into who I am as an educational leader, my style, and the focus placed on my school. This chapter is organized during three phases. The first includes data gathered during the professional learning communities’ compliant years from 2008-2009. The second includes the Treatment Years from 2009-2011, which were focused on systemic systems put in place in order to impact PLCs move towards a transformation shift. The third includes evidence gathered of transformational PLCs during the 2011-2012 school year focusing on long-term goals, student academic achievement, and building teacher capacity. Finally, analysis of the data in this study attempted to answer the questions that guided this study and are discussed in Chapter 5:

1. How did professional learning communities change and evolve over a four-year period of time (2008-2012) at Little Bricks Elementary School?
2. How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the development and implementation of professional learning communities over a four-year period of time (2008-2012)?

**PLC Compliant Years**

**2008 - 2009**

It was February 12, 2008, one of many days that I would spend observing, prior to my first day as principal at Little Bricks Elementary School. The goal was to visit the site in order to become better acquainted with the facilities, organization, management, and most importantly, spend time with the administrators, coaches, and the grade level leaders so that I could get a “lay of the land” of the school. The objective was to meet with the instructional coaches, who helped lead the goals of the school. The coaches and administrators met weekly in what the school called the Professional Development Committee (PDC) during a scheduled professional learning community (PLC) vertical team meeting.

(Personal Journal Entry, February 2008)

It was evident during my visit to Little Brick Elementary School prior to officially starting as the principal that the school maintained some of the necessary structures and systems of professional learning communities (PLCs) as discussed in my literature review. It had incorporated schedules for teachers to meet in grade level meetings, and the administration had chosen five teacher leaders—one for each grade level (K-4)—to lead PLCs. Agendas had been established by the school’s coaches. A vertical leadership team, which was referred to as the Professional Development Committee (PDC), was created that involved the administrators, coaches, and five teacher leaders (See Table 4). At LBES, entry into the PDC was perceived to be the highest level of recognition of teachers’ best practices that can be shared throughout the
The following journal entry depicts my first impression of LBES PLC and my reflection afterwards.

I entered Room 204 and observed twelve individuals sitting around a conference room table reading through an article from ASCD’s journal, *Educational Leadership*. I recall how impressed I was to see teachers discussing an article and not merely reviewing standard operating procedures or random meeting points. The individual leading the meeting introduced herself to me as Mrs. N., the literacy coach for the school. She shared how the article highlighted the importance of collaborative groups in literacy development. As per my journal entry notes, the meeting began at 10:25 a.m., and I had entered the room at 10:35 a.m. It ended at 11:15 a.m., and Mrs. N. did what I had initially thought was a good job of going through this article. A couple of weeks after that visit, as I revisited my journal entry and reflected, I realized that the only person who spoke during the entire meeting was Mrs. N . . .

(Personal Journal Entry, March 2008)

The PLC system and structure at LBES consisted of the three coaches: literacy, math, and science. As mentioned in my journal entry below, by the first week of school in September 2008, the coaches had provided me with an outline of what the topics for the year’s meeting agendas would be. A focus and system for collecting data were established. The coaches outlined the entire district and school data collection deadlines and curricular focus areas, and they guided teachers on how to gather this information and at times would actually gather the information for them.

Met with the literacy coach, Mrs. N., once again. She has been leading the PDC meetings since its inception last year. She provided me with the year's agenda for PDC
meetings and every single grade level PLC. She explained that the agendas are completed by the first day of school. I am a bit alarmed by this. It is obvious that the agendas are completed and carried out by her. She admits to it and appears to think that this is a best practice . . .

(Personal Journal Entry, April 5, 2008)

Based on my observations and journal entries in 2008, it was evident that the PLCs referred to as “grade levels,” and the Professional Development Committee (PDC) meetings were run and managed by the coaching staff. Other journal entries and grade level leader feedback in later years indicated the yielding nature of teachers during PLCs in the Compliant Years as noted below:

She talks through articles and "talks" to the staff and the staff seem willing to listen. There is very little collaboration occurring. What I am seeing in these meetings is a microcosm of what I am seeing in my walkthroughs of the classrooms, all lecture and teacher focused . . . I'm looking forward to digging deeper into this issue . . .

(Personal Journal Entry, April 2008)

It doesn't appear to me that the vice-principals or the previous principal had much to do with running the grade levels or the PDC . . . I see that as a major problem . . . Mrs. N. appears to be quite knowledgeable; however, my concern is that I don't see her going into classrooms providing the kind of support that she is supposed to provide teachers as a coach.

(Personal Journal Entry, April 2008)

We didn’t have the ability to make decisions; we knew we weren’t allowed to do much of anything. We followed agendas, we had meeting times, we had minutes and there
was structure; but the coaches clearly led and we listened. That was clearly our role. We were to receive information and listen.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

Additionally, during the Compliant Years, based on grade level leader feedback from 2010, there is a clear lack of personal sense of responsibility to lead on behalf of the teacher leaders. They referred to themselves as helpers to others who actually led the meetings; namely, the coaches. There was a clear understanding that their role was to assist the work of the coach in the PLC, not to lead it. They simply saw themselves as individuals who “disseminated” information that reflected the decisions primarily of the coaches and then the administrators when it came to “leading” the PLCs. There was a clear disconnect in their responses to “doing” what was expected of them.

This is my first year as a Grade Level Leader.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I have been a part of PDC and have had the opportunity to lead “teacher talk.” Otherwise, the coach has really led the week-to-week leadership roles.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I’ve never done this in the past, my first time as leader.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I have followed the grade level agendas that are set by the coaches for the year and am part of teacher talk once a month. If the coaches need me to fill in for them, I also do that on a week-to-week basis.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Helped the coaches collect information when needed and was part of PDC. Overall, I also have made sure to help maintain a positive climate and culture
by supporting and promoting the school vision and mission.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Based on the responses above, three out of the five teacher leaders were returning grade level leaders, and all of their responses refer to the coaches leading the PLC in some form or another and their role in supporting the coaches’ work as leader. Teacher leaders were not provided with the opportunities to truly lead, except for the two individuals mentioning “teacher talk”; however, even with the second mention of “teacher talk,” that individual explained how they went through the agendas set by coaches before there was an opportunity for teachers to openly talk. The teacher leaders clearly did not begrudge the fact that they were being compliant to the coaches; they were simply stating the structures that were in place and were outlining the limitations of their so-called “leadership role” without realizing that they were leaders in name only. It was evident by their responses below in the Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaires from 2010 that teacher leaders felt a sense of autonomy and the liberty to share best practices that impacted student achievement only during “teacher talk” sessions, which were the only times during PLC meetings where coaches were not present and teachers were able to meet on their own.

I would like to see more time for teacher talk. During those sessions when we were left on our own, there seemed to be a different level of sharing that allowed teachers to share and collaborate that I would like to see again or more of. It was the only time I actually felt as if I was leading.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I would like the coaches to allow us to work with them in developing the agenda.
I think we could help them in more of the tasks that they take on.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I would like for the coaches to hold some of the other members accountable for work. The teachers sit back and receive. I believe we need to start collaborating more and not just expect the coaches or leaders to do it all.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I wish we could have more vertical and horizontal meetings. We would gain a great deal from that. The coaches conveying messages to us from other grade levels is not enough.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Four out of the five responses clearly stated how the teacher leaders felt there was a clear need for shared leadership to take place in the PLCs. One response stated that collaboration was key and teachers should not sit back and expect the coaches to do it all. Another response from a teacher leader asked that the coaches allow teacher leaders to partake in the creation of the agendas, stating that they felt they could be valuable in helping with the tasks that the coaches took on. One response spoke directly to “teacher talk.” The teacher leader’s response included the sense of “a different level of sharing . . .” and also that “It was the only time I actually felt as though I was leading.” The teacher leaders were clearly stating that they would like more of an opportunity to lead. The last comment from the teacher leader was seeking more time to share with colleagues as to what was occurring across the grades and PLCs. In essence what they were asking for was more time to be collaborative in actual professional learning communities as opposed to sitting in meetings receiving information.
Ultimately, teacher responses and reflection journal entries during the Compliant Years indicated that there was a PLC structure in place, but there were essential facets in the actual PLC that needed to be addressed. A powerful response from a Teacher Leader Feedback Questionnaire in 2012 encapsulates the disconnect and purpose of PLCs referred to as grade level meetings and teacher talk during the Compliant Years.

I still remember the times that I led teacher talk and the satisfaction that everyone had and the sense of fulfillment. We clearly felt there was a difference between what we did on a weekly basis when the coaches led and on the teacher talk days that we were provided with some time to have free talk. We never verbalized it, but there was a good feeling and at times there would be comments where we would all say, I wish we could do this more often.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

Clearly these perceptions were not solely the perceptions of the teacher leaders; all of the teaching staff were asked to complete surveys throughout the years about the effectiveness of their grade level meetings. It was important to be able to validate perceptions throughout the teaching staff. Of the 2008-2010 Instructional Quality/Climate and Culture surveys, surveys related to PLCs were provided to the staff on an ongoing basis. It was evident, based on the teacher responses to multiple surveys, that there was a discontent among the participants of the PLCs. The following questions are examples that demonstrate the teachers’ alignment with the teacher leaders:
Table 5

*Instructional Quality/Climate and Culture Responses (2008 – 2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Questions</th>
<th>Teacher Selected Response Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rate the amount of sharing and discussing teaching methodologies and strategies that were occurring during PLCs.</td>
<td>62% of teachers answered “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rate the level of collaboration and teachers willingness to work together.</td>
<td>32% of teachers scored answered “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rate the high level of PLC shared Norms and Values.</td>
<td>29% scored answered “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rate the level of openness to improvement and their ability to take risks:</td>
<td>40% scored answered “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rate the level of trust and respect that teachers felt with one another</td>
<td>75% of the teachers responded “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rate the quality of time to meet and talk during PLC or meetings.</td>
<td>57% of the teachers scored a answered “not at all, somewhat or 50”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rate the interdependent teaching roles where teachers work together integrating lessons and team teaching</td>
<td>75% of the teachers scored answered “not at all, somewhat or 50%”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, when the teachers were asked about communication structures and opportunities for an exchange of ideas as teams and grade levels/PLCs, 68% of teachers scored answered, “Not at all, somewhat, or 50% on the survey as it related to teacher empowerment and school autonomy to make decisions regarding their work guided by the norms and beliefs of the PLCs.

It is clear, based on the summary of responses, that teacher perceptions and beliefs resounded with as much discontent as that of the teacher leaders. The PLCs were perceived throughout the Little Bricks Elementary School teacher population as a set of meetings that did
not function as a collaborative learning community but rather as a set of meetings that were compliant to school and district mandates.

**Treatment Years**

**2009-2011**

**External Factors**

Every school year, either by selection of the school leader or teacher volunteering, a grade level leader was selected to be part of the Professional Development Committee (PDC). The PDC was a vertical meeting put in place to address educational and school issues and was scheduled to meet once a week for 45 minutes. The PDC had been in place for two years when I arrived at Little Bricks Elementary School. The intent was for the PDC to provide an opportunity for the grade level leaders (teacher leaders) to form a part of the school’s leadership team, to have an opportunity to professionally enhance learning, an opportunity that the school was promoting for all teachers in the building to lead others in their grade levels. In essence, it was the teacher leaders’ PLC.

When asked about the 2010-2011 school year and what they were most looking forward to as grade level leaders (teacher leaders), the responses were as follows:

Hope to work closely with the coaches to gain more insight on district initiatives.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Looking forward to being a part of PDC and working with teachers from other grade levels. Will be great to hear what other grade levels are doing.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

I hope to be able to grow from the information that is provided by administration and the coaches during PDC.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)
I hope that I may be given more tasks to complete as a leader by the coaches and administrators so my leadership skills could be put to the test.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Public speaking. I hope to be able to speak to my grade level colleagues and have the respect the coaches have from them.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, May 28, 2010)

Two out of the five responses were directly related to their participation in the school’s Professional Development Committee (PDC). Membership in PDC also meant that one was a part of the leadership team at the school. This was something that I saw as evident in the responses provided by the teacher leaders. From the time I arrived at Little Bricks Elementary school until 2010, the teacher leaders were selected by the administration and coaches; however, many of the teachers were eager to be labeled as teacher leaders and to be a part of the PDC. It was an unspoken honor to be a part of this vertical team. It meant one was a leader in the school and part of the upper echelon of teachers.

All five responses clearly spoke to their hopes of professional development and growth by being selected as a teacher leader. One individual spoke directly in her response that growth would be provided based on involvement in the Professional Development Committee; another spoke to learning about district initiatives, and another spoke to being able to learn what other grade levels are doing through the sharing that takes place in PDC. Two of the responses called for being provided with opportunities to lead in order for their public speaking to be enhanced, and the other would like their leadership abilities to be put to the test.

In April 2010 the district announced that coaches were no longer to be included in the school’s infrastructure due to budget constraints. The positions were to be dissolved and all
coaches were to return to classrooms as teachers. The implications for teacher leaders at Little Bricks Elementary School were that they had now inherited the work of the coaches as they led professional learning communities. As a result, responses below from a Grade Level Facilitator Feedback Questionnaire (2011), informed me what concerns teacher leaders might have now that coaches were no longer part of the school.

The coaches did a tremendous amount of work. They really did the bulk of the work. I hope it is not expected of us. As a new leader, I am concerned that it is assumed that we have the knowledge and time to do all of the things they did. They inputted all of the data, not us. They disaggregated the data and told us where we needed to focus our efforts. Who’s going to do that? Are we expected to have that kind of knowledge? We need to be trained. How about our teaching schedules? We can’t do this alone. Coaching is all they did. Actually, very little coaching of teachers. What they did was a lot of our work, which I appreciate; however, now that they are gone, we don’t know how to do it!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

Provide us with the tools to “lead.” I am not sure that I know how to do that. I helped the coaches; but left on my own, I’m not sure I can do it. Just thinking about how they took the data stuff and handled it for us is an area that I know I can’t do. Who will be expected to do this for us now? I hope not us. We just don’t know how. They gave us all of those answers.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

Set clear expectations for all and make sure that it is clear to all that we are not the new coaches. We are helping facilitate the work that will be done together. The changes in
the district have caused a disconnect in the building. If we are going to “lead” the PLCs, then we need to make sure that the staff knows that we will need them to collaborate. We need to start working on the data piece, which the coaches handled for us and make sure we start taking control of that. We, as leaders, should not be expected to take that over now, it should be the responsibility of every teacher working together in their teams.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

These three responses from the Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaires provided a look at how frustrated the teacher leaders were. As is evident in the responses, the issue of being responsible for data collection was a concern of the grade level leaders. The announcement of alarming budget cuts for the 2011-2012 school year, which resulted in all coaches’ positions being cut from school budgets, intensified the teacher leader angst by increasing initiatives that were to be implemented in every school for that coming year.

**Planned Treatment**

For the entire 2010-2011 school year, my goal was to begin exposing all teachers who were interested with topics that I knew would be essential foundations as we began to actually incorporate these specific necessary initiatives into their PLCs. I had carefully planned areas of growth required to make this shift for the 2011-2012 school year. I had instituted as much professional development with current grade level leaders and other teachers that I felt could have leadership potential for the future during the previous year. Teachers at LBES were so accustomed to being told what to do and having things done for them that my goal was to begin to build capacity and have as many teachers have a sense of what shared leadership could look like and how we would begin looking at changes in the coming year.
My initial plan and vision clearly included sharing data with staff that described best practices in PLCs and sharing their very own frustrations as described through their own words on questionnaires and surveys. We were therefore able to start the discussion of how we could start making the shift to a different kind of PLC and what that would look like in the future. The shift began by investing in teacher learning and beginning to share leadership among teacher leaders in a manner that had not been done before at Little Bricks Elementary School.

The biggest change factor was the implementation of the Teacher Leadership Institute (TLI), which I implemented during the 2010-2011 school year. The Teacher Leadership Institute was a time for us to describe and discuss best practices, which I strategically selected in preparation for our upcoming transformational shift. The TLI sessions were well attended and were the foundation for key stakeholders to become knowledgeable on major concepts of leadership as well as forming a core group of teachers that championed these initiatives as they started in the coming year.

At the Teacher Leadership Institutes, which met in the mornings and after school, we began conducting book studies as well as studying best practices in education. We started by conducting a book study of Richard DuFour’s book *Professional Learning Communities at Work* and several other professional articles on PLCs. The goal was to dig deep into the necessary shifts we needed to make in order to make PLCs the vehicle for transformation of learning in our school. We focused on the five dimensions identified by Hord (1997, 2004), which offered the central framework for the characteristics for transformational PLCs. We then moved to discuss the work that needed to be done in PLCs in order to impact student learning.
Other books that enhanced the collaborative environment were *Understanding by Design* by Wiggins & McTighe (2005), *Driven by Data* by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2010), and *The Power of SMART Goals* by Conzemius and O’Neil (2006). The Teacher Leadership Institute culminated with our overview of the book *The Skillful Leader* by J. Saphier. Via the book study we discussed areas that are essential to high performing schools, such as how a teacher’s skill makes a difference in student performance, not only in achievement scores but also in the students’ sense of fulfillment in school and their feelings of well-being.

Instituting the Teacher Leadership Institute (TLI) during the Treatment Year (2010-2011) was a powerful beginning in order to have initial buy-in and initial understanding prior to fully implementing the dramatic systemic shifts that I had planned to undertake. We had 10-12 teachers attend the TLIs consistently twice a month throughout the Treatment Year. This was very important, as I understood that another critical theme associated with successful schools involved the premise of fostering teacher empowerment in order to build professional capacity. I continually shared with my teacher leaders that year that “shared expertise is the driver of instructional change” (Elmore & Burney, 1999, p. 272).

The teachers during the last few months of the 2011 school year were provided with a great many vision-setting workshops and with an opportunity to be a part of a leadership institute led by the principal. During the Teacher Leadership Institute, I incorporated many of the initiatives that I had hoped to put into motion in the coming year. It was in April 2011 that I began announcing that we would be asking teachers interested in becoming teacher leaders to submit letters of interest. It was through these letters and brief interviews that staff were selected to be the teacher leaders for the 2011-2012 school year. During the interviews, we had a panel that included teachers and administrators to select the teacher leaders. It was
understood that the individuals selected must have a clear vision of shared leadership, an ability to lead, a basic understanding of some of the initiatives that we had begun to discuss in our leadership institute, and most importantly, that they were to possess a clear core belief that students had the potential to be taken to boundless limits.

Many of the basic structures and systems necessary for professional learning communities to exist that were in place in 2008 (Compliant Years) were still in place during the Treatment Year. Teachers were still allotted one period per week to meet with their grade level teams. The meetings which had always been referred to as grade level meetings were now called professional learning communities (PLCs). Additional scheduled common planning time was provided to all teachers, twice per marking period, so that teachers could work together with their PLCs on whichever tasks they needed to work on. They were referred to as “double planning periods.” Teacher leaders were provided extra preparation periods per week in order to plan for their PLC, and teacher leaders during the Treatment Year were asked to submit an application in order to become a grade level facilitator. Teacher leaders were no longer chosen by the administration; rather, they chose to apply to be a teacher leader. The responses below are from successful candidates exhibiting the caliber of teacher leader enthusiasm on their teacher leader application during the Treatment Year.

I have participated in Ms. Mendez’ Teacher Leader Institutes and everything from designing the units she wants to design through UBD, the Driven by Data stuff and especially the Skillful Teacher material on core values. If we are planning on being that focused during our grade level meetings and are able to be given more room to have the ability to actually be leaders, then this is something that I want to do! I have been doing it for the last three years and have always stated that we could do more, if given
the training and opportunity. I think it will take work to get everyone on board, but
that’s why it’s important to have someone that knows how to work with this group. I
have really enjoyed all of the stuff we’ve reviewed and believe if we implement it from
the very beginning in an organized way, things could be very different, and I do believe
that the teachers would like it. I think they are bored with just getting information. I
know the teachers and I have been part of PDC, and I agree with the vision that Ms.
Mendez is setting forward, and I am willing to learn all I need to learn in order to lead
my Grade Level into a new way of collaboration!!

(Portion of Applicant Response to Teacher Leader Application, April 2011)

Having gone through the Teacher Leader Institute with Ms. Mendez this year,
I have been so excited to read about all of the things that we can possibly do
during Grade Level Meetings. I am in total agreement with Ms. Mendez’ Strategic Plan
to move us into true Learning Communities, as we read during our institute, that
DuFour recommends. I think moving us into being more hands on, on assessment,
using the Driven by Data material is integral in attempting to really look deeper into
how we re-teach and what we teach. We have never really done common assessments
that way. I’m mostly excited about that! Allowing us to come up with our own
SMART Goals—what a challenge! I believe in our new vision and I am ready to take
on any doubters, which I know there will be, in my Grade Level Community or PLC as
we will be calling it next year! I am ready, thanks to Ms. Mendez’ institute, and I am
motivated to be a true leader!

(Portion of Applicant Response to Teacher Leader Application, April 2011)
During the Treatment Year a deliberate shift towards grade level leaders being referred to as grade level facilitators or teacher leaders was put in place. Both terms reflected that the school and its constituents were aligned to our vision of their work; they were to facilitate and lead the work of the PLCs. Teacher leaders were provided with extensive coaching and a great deal of capacity building from the principal in order to aid in facilitating PLCs effectively. A greater level of autonomy and shared decision-making power was provided to the teacher leaders in order to have ownership of agendas and the direction of their PLCs. Data collection continued to be very extensive and extremely important. Teachers were starting to understand the importance of being in charge of collecting all student data, creating student assessments and discussing corrective teaching plans based on teacher-made, formative and summative assessments. Re-teaching or corrective teaching weeks were implemented and all PLCs went through Conzemius and O’Neil’s (2005) goal-setting protocols of SMART goals. The goals were monitored on a continuous basis by teachers who also created individual classroom SMART goals based on their specific assessment data.

Finally, the Professional Development Committee meeting (PDC) had become a true collaborative vertical team for teacher leaders. It was the professional learning community for the teacher leaders. During PDC, teacher leaders shared learning and celebrated accomplishments that occurred during their respective PLCs. School-wide professional development decisions were made that impacted all teachers and shared decision-making on curricular issues were discussed. It was also an opportunity for teacher leaders to gain insight into the school’s direction and action planning.
The Start of PLC Transformation

2011-2012

Transformation amongst Teacher Leaders

We began the teacher leaders’ journey during the Transformational Year by having a teacher leader retreat on June 14, 2011. During the retreat the vision for Little Bricks Elementary School was reviewed and we brainstormed their role as leaders in the school. The teacher leaders were extremely nervous about the coming year and the level of responsibility that would be expected of them. This was compounded by the fact that the coaches were no longer part of the school due to budget cuts.

Provide us with the tools to “lead.” I am not sure that I know how to do that. I helped the coaches, but left on my own, I’m not sure I can do it. Just thinking about how they took the data stuff and handled it for us is an area that I know I can’t do. Who will be expected to do this for us now? I hope not us. We just don’t know how. They gave us all of those answers.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

Set clear expectations for all and make sure that it is clear to all that we are not the new coaches. We are helping to facilitate the work that will be done together. The changes in the district have caused a disconnect in the building. If we are going to “lead” the PLCs, then we need to make sure that the staff knows that we will need them to collaborate. We need to start working on the data piece, which the Coaches handled for us and make sure we start taking control of that. We, as leaders, should not be expected to take that over now, it should be the responsibility of every teacher
working together in their teams.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

Let’s change the paradigm we had in the past of having a leader/coach do all the work and let’s make sure all individuals work together towards a collective end by clearly defining roles of leaders, teachers and administrative team.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 14, 2011)

As time progressed and things were going smoothly, I felt confirmed that I had chosen the right time to move forward with my plans to make bold, transformational changes in regard to shared leadership, decision making, and autonomy on how PLCs functioned in the school. I wanted teachers at Little Bricks Elementary School to become active participants of their own learning. I was ready to foster shared leadership at the school. I understood that in order to make a shift to transformational PLCs, I would have to be willing to share the power, authority, and decision making that comes with being a school principal. I was ready to participate democratically with teachers by sharing power, authority, and decision making among staff in an effort to promote and nurture leadership.

I was clear in my commitment to share leadership of the school and provide greater autonomy to the teachers. I also believed that a basic conceptual framework highlighting traits of successful schools centered on a shared vision for learning (Elmore & Burney, 1999). The process of learning and teachers seeing themselves as constant learners would serve as one of the core values for teachers to shape their long-term commitments for instructional improvement.

During the 2011-2012 school year, I earned entry into the Cahn Fellows Program for Distinguished Principals at Teachers College, Columbia University. This year-long fellowship provided me with extended professional development and mentorship from noted professors at
Teachers College. I was provided with a unique opportunity to collaborate and obtain feedback and recommendations on my work at LBES from other distinguished principals during the 2011-2012 school year. The Cahn Fellowship Program also provided me with intensive professional development and mentorship opportunities with experts in the area of developing and maintaining professional learning communities and expanding shared leadership opportunities at LBES. The two faculty advisors that mentored me that year are noted researchers, authors, and professors. The collegial collaboration that occurred amongst other principals and, most importantly, the intensive mentoring that took place during the 2011-2012 year with my faculty advisors/mentors served as an essential guide for me during the Transformational Year at LBES.

During the opening day sessions for the 2011-2012 school year, the focus was on making the transformational shift in professional learning communities by increasing the collaboration among colleagues and increasing the role of teachers as active decision makers and leaders at Little Bricks Elementary School. The focus of the opening day session was to set the stage for the work that had begun in the latter part of the previous year. I was very transparent about our shift and about our plans moving forward during the beginning of the Transformational Year.

We saw the beginning of transformation occur as teachers began to speak out about what their true beliefs were. We had similar breakthrough responses and sharing on all of the seven belief statements that were pivotal to teachers viewing themselves as learners. I described the beliefs as necessary beliefs in order to “unleash curiosity and energy for teacher learning.” On that opening day we began unpacking the belief statements and throughout the month of September we were able to continue having conversations regarding the clarity that needed to occur as it related to our core values. By the end of September 2011, based on conversations
and dialogue with all, one of my proudest moments was when the teacher leaders came to me at the end of September to let me know that they had developed a clear set of core values and beliefs on teaching and learning at Little Bricks Elementary School at their PLCs. I was beginning to see tangible results that led me to believe we were transforming the culture of the school. Our core values and vision were determined by the staff at Little Bricks Elementary School to be the following:

At Little Bricks Elementary School, we believe that all students can achieve at a high level given the right conditions, which include our implied obligation to expand our capacity to reach that expectation. As the facilitator of the learning environment, I will design a climate that is characterized by community, mutual support, risk taking, and higher-level thinking for all. As an effective educator, I will continue to evolve in my professional knowledge in order to encompass areas of performance in order to effectively match my repertoire of skills to the students I serve and will work with my team in order to develop a school of skillful teachers!

(Little Bricks Elementary School Core Values and Beliefs, September 2011)

The opening day success was in collaboration with the support and buy-in from the teacher leaders who received extensive/intentional and systemic professional development during the previous year: Treatment Year. We continued to meet during the Teacher Institute and retreats to support teacher leaders on how to lead PLCs. This was an attempt to create an environment in PLCs with the support of a teacher leader, whereby teachers were able to share practices with one another and were provided resources to grow in areas of need. This is supported by one of the teacher leader feedbacks below at the end of the teacher leader retreat in December 2011.
The teachers’ commitment to instructional innovations increased as a result of having had received support and relevant professional development and being allowed to be vulnerable and share our craft with our colleagues.

(Mrs. M., teacher leader, excerpt from her sharing-out portion during teacher leader retreat, December 2011)

Perhaps the most enriching portion of our transition to transformational PLCs was the time that I spent coaching the teacher leaders. I provided them with my personal cell phone number and assured them that they could reach me at any time. Three out of five communicated with me on an ongoing basis. They reached out for coaching opportunities regularly. I spent at least once a week with each of them during a preparation period discussing an area of growth or strategizing based on a concern that they had in their PLCs.

What a team! They are so vested. I am committed to making sure that I provide them with the resources that they need to excel and feel like the professionals that they are! I have given each teacher leader a SMART board as a thank you and in order to remind them that although they are doing a great deal of work, I will continue to support them with resources to continue their professional growth. They are constantly asking me how they can grow and improve the PLCs. I am compelled to provide them with the support they need. I think that I did not provide them with all of the tools they needed in the beginning of the year and there was a bit of frustration; however, as a result of the retreats and the time we’ve spent together, things are coming together! I am so very proud of them!

(Personal Journal Entry, January 6, 2012)
The teacher leader responses a year later were in stark contrast to what they had shared almost a year earlier as they reflected on their experiences in PLCs during their end of the year retreat.

There was an absolute transformation! I have to admit that I was not a full believer that what occurred could have occurred. Ms. Mendez could not have planned it any more perfectly. It started from our Grade Level Leader retreat last June. She had us talk about and brainstorm what we would want our PLCs to look like and she promised us if we committed to a shift in how we do things in PLCs, she would support our leadership roles in the PLCs.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

The opening day staff development kicked it off. She set the stage with the vision-setting and belief statements based on the Skillful Teacher book. It made everyone reflect on what we really believe in as a school. We agreed upon Core Values. That was huge!! She then provided everyone with a common language. Grade Level Meetings became Professional Learning Communities, Grade Level Leaders were to now be referred to as Grade Level Facilitators or Teacher Leaders and our Core Values were to be explicitly expressed throughout the school with a focus on every student’s ability to succeed in their own way, our role and responsibility in believing and making that happen and making sure that we believed that every child deserved a level of rigor based on the belief that they could all learn.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

She totally led the school in amazing staff development that was so calculated! It was as if she had been waiting for the right moment to unleash this new structure for our
school. It was definitely the right time. I don’t believe it would have worked before. Having us focus on how we collaborate as a PLC, having us define our norms as a PLC, and providing us with the training we needed to run the PLCs was amazing. It was hard but by the middle of the year, we had it. I could never have envisioned this happening last year. Teachers were sharing in PLCs, teachers were spending time in each other’s classrooms learning from each other, and tasks were divided among everyone. It was actually fun and we all looked forward to attending the PLCs.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

From one year to the other, I have seen a total difference! The support from Ms. Mendez has been unbelievable. The teachers know that the messages are one and the same. She attends the PLCs, as do the VPs and they respect the agendas I set up. That’s such a change! They ask me for time on my agenda! It’s been a great learning experience and I have grown as a professional in leaps and bounds!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

Ms. Mendez always says that the biggest challenge is attempting to lead good teachers to greatness! She is so right! My greatest area of improvement was how to utilize the strategies she provided us through the resources we were given during the Staff Development and the Facilitator retreats. Being able to share with other Facilitators what was going on was so helpful. Ms. Mendez had a 10 minute slot during PDC where we would share Early Wins and that was great!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

All responses from the teacher leaders in the end of the year questionnaires spoke to their initial uncertainty as the year began and how the transformation occurred in the PLCs based on the support they were given from the administration, the systems put in place that allowed for all
teachers to play a role, the level of staff development and additional resources provided to them, and most importantly, the autonomy provided to them to lead. Those factors had made such a significant impact in creating transformational professional learning communities at Little Bricks Elementary School.

We are a true team. It has been a total transformation! We all have diverse strengths, and we all have different roles based on those strengths. Ms. Mendez and the VPs have provided all sorts of documentation so that teachers know that there is an accountability, but it is not really that necessary. All of the teachers have risen to the occasion and we have been able to share like never before. Even the teachers that are usually in our PLC very quiet and reserved tend to collaborate as Ms. Mendez has us rotate to present student work and best practices from our classrooms. We are also spending time in each other’s classrooms taking a look at what we are doing. We have learned a great deal this year. I am looking forward to our continued transformation next year!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

The biggest stumbling block evident in the teacher leader responses in the past had been their inability to lead or their lack of leadership experiences due to the coaches leading in the past.

We struggled a great deal as Teacher Leaders in the beginning, not knowing norms and protocols to run PLCs. Even though three of us had been Teacher Leaders in the past, we never really led. So during the Teacher Leader retreats, Ms. Mendez worked with us on providing us with methods on devising PLC Norms. We did it together as a faculty and then we were to do it in our PLCs. That was a wonderful tool. Ms. Mendez
also provided Roles and Responsibilities for all PLC members so that all teachers knew that they had their part and role in the success of our PLC. Also, Ms. Mendez emphasized our need to self-reflect so we created a Rubric for Effective PLCs during PDC. All of these items helped us be better leaders.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

Their responses had indicated that they were not sure they would be able to lead, nor did they feel they had the tools to lead, especially when they responded to the data collection process that the coaches handled for the staff at the school in the past.

Transformation within PLCs

Teacher leaders responded to their role as true leaders during the week-to-week planning of their PLCs as they undertook their new roles as true leaders. Now they were in charge of reviewing data in order to create SMART goals. The work conducted during the PLCs was always provided with resources that placed them as leaders in the role of true facilitators of the data. They were taught how to disseminate information and work with their colleagues in order to effectively gain teacher collaboration. They also spoke to how the systems that the school had put in place assisted in assuring that all teachers had a defined set of roles and responsibilities.

I noticed that in every single PLC the teachers are just waiting for us to provide them with the SMART goal. I can tell they are wondering why I am asking them to do it. They must think I have a “gotcha” reason behind all of this . . . I was so pleasantly surprised to see that the SMART goals were right on track! They did such a great job with them! As a matter of fact, after debriefing the SMART goals with each PLC, we had to lower some of the benchmarks, as the teachers were a bit more challenging and
optimistic with their predictions than I would probably have been. I realize that teachers are not used to having this much autonomy.

(Personal Journal Entry, October 1, 2011)

Having the ability to work with the teacher leaders in the area of arbitrating decisions that were made as they related to SMART goals or any other site-based decision was a growing process for me as it related to the teacher leaders and for the teacher leaders as it related to the teachers in their PLCs.

The area that I feel that I have grown and learned the most would have to be in my ability to delegate. Ms. Mendez provided us with readings from various articles and books where we discussed how to delegate and lead our PLCs and not do it all. Those were difficult readings to digest because I didn’t know how to delegate the work, especially with all of the teachers in my PLC that are prone to not wanting to pull their weight. However, through Ms. Mendez’ guidance and with all of the structures that were put in place, it became so much easier to delegate and hold my colleagues accountable.

Also, Ms. Mendez and the other VPs were so visible in the PLCs that the teachers always wanted to please – that was a plus! LOL!! I still struggle with doing too much, but I plan on continuing to improve in that area! Also, the videos that we were shown were awesome! Funny and applied so well to the PLCs. We constantly referred to pushy worker, compliant worker, etc. It always got a chuckle. I also think I grew a great deal in learning how to deal with people that are different than me. When Ms. Mendez presented the true colors, it was so eye opening. I am gold and the only gold in my PLC – so that
says a whole lot. LOL. Learning how to collaborate and deal with people that are different than me is eye opening but has been rewarding!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

The new PLC structure had transformed to a total “teacher talk” time and so much more from the start of my tenure as principal at Little Bricks Elementary School.

Additionally, the Professional Development Committee (PDC) became even more of an integral part of the professional learning community structure at Little Bricks Elementary School. It was now the forum where the teacher leaders shared with one another and gained insight on protocols and best practices. It had been a goal of the PDC to be the PLC for the teacher leaders. As the leader of the PLC, as the school principal and the educational leader of the building, it was very important for me to demonstrate to the teacher leaders everything that I would expect them to implement in their PLCs. I also wanted the PDC to be a safe place where they could share with one another their successes and struggles, always with the hope that they would take with them possible solutions and strategies to implement. The PDC became the forum where school-based decisions were truly made. We shifted decision making for the school, which was focused previously on the principal, to a leadership team that was comprised of the PDC on most school-based issues.

In the past we had not had a clear student-focused approach to our PLCs, which is evidenced by the teacher leader responses. As we surveyed the teacher leaders in the past year we noticed strikingly different responses for all three of the teacher leaders that were present to respond to the 2012 surveys. The other two teacher leaders were not present because one had resigned in late May and the other was out sick during the leadership retreat. When asked about how the focus of PLCs had changed to a more student-focused approach, all three
teacher leaders commented that in the past year there had been a clear PLC focus on student work as opposed to the work they had experienced in the past.

This year, from the very beginning, Ms. Mendez stressed that the focus of our PLCs were to be on improving how we collaborate in order to be able to work better with one another so we can effectively focus on student work and ultimately improve student outcomes. We produced so much this year! We started by Ms. Mendez having us analyze what we did on an ongoing basis. We really didn’t have a curriculum map that we had devised. We just followed the pacing chart. She asked us to do that first. That was so eye-opening to see how much time we actually focused on areas that perhaps were not necessary

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

That task was ongoing throughout the year, and Ms. Mendez will have us continue to work on that as we move towards the Common Core next year. We then delved into Driven by Data and read excerpts of the book and started to work on how we assessed our students formatively. We realized that we were focusing on unit tests and other standardized tests without really focusing on the students that were sitting in our seats.

We began to devise common assessments and assessing student trends in order to plan re-teaching plans. We then independently by grade analyzed all student data and created SMART goals.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

Ms. Mendez reviewed with us during staff development as well as PLCs the process of going through SMART goals. We devised grade level specific SMART goals, which
we monitored throughout the year. I have learned so much! And the focus on student work and student outcomes has been so rewarding!!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

The total focus on student work and outcomes was such a shift from what we had been doing for the last six years in PLCs. It was truly a transformational move. We went from tasks or being passive to being total active participants, and the focus was enhancing collaboration and digging deeply on sharpening our craft in order to better service our students. We were focused and we were so encouraged to take a close look at our level of responsibility in making sure students succeeded.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

There are still quite a few teachers on the fence about their level of responsibility – I can tell; however, I am quite sure that we are well on our way to winning them over. The structures are in place where they kind of have to either be active participants or they stand out like a sore thumb.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

I particularly have enjoyed the common assessments and taking a look at where students are in specific skill areas. This has been tough for some teachers who have been feeling quite vulnerable. However, by the third common assessment, we have been able to focus more on student improvement and less on ego. I am sure there are still some teachers on the fence, but for the most part it is about how to make the students learn.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)
The curriculum maps have been by far my favorite piece of focus of student work. I am a bit frustrated that now we have to totally re-do a great deal of what we had done because of the insurgence of the Common Core; however, we did learn a great deal about our perceptions of what we taught and what we needed to teach, and then the discussions based on the common assessments were also eye opening in planning out the maps. I believe that we are headed in the right direction!!

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

We met all of our SMART goals, which was such a fantastic experience for us. Setting those goals and having everyone held accountable for them was eye-opening. It wasn’t just the school goals and Ms. Mendez’ goals; it was the goals of each grade level, and each teacher could speak to them and was keeping tabs on how they were doing with their goals. That was rewarding.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

During the Staff Development days we would have a time where we would share what Ms. Mendez called early wins or wins and successes. That was a great time for us to share with one another, particularly across grade levels, which we don’t normally do. Also, our faculty meetings became all about the work we were doing with students, and the teachers were able to share best practices with one another based on student work and artifacts they would share.

(Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaire, June 13, 2012)

The focus on student work during the PLCs was maintained due to the focus on each PLCs SMART goal throughout the year. This was something new for the teachers. In the past the culture at the school was not to share or discuss student results. The emphasis on SMART
goals provided the PLCs with an additional push to review student work. We continually took a look at protocols for reviewing student work, and we began to investigate the creation of common assessments for the coming year.

We were able to create a complete curriculum map for every grade level and every content area, which delineated what skill sets teachers were teaching and included a pacing chart. This was an amazing accomplishment for Little Bricks Elementary School. We had never had a map that provided us with a guideline of curriculum that was taught. In the past we had just followed the district pacing chart without personalizing for our school and students. My goal for having the teachers create a curriculum map was in anticipation for the creation of common assessments as well as the creation of units as we transitioned in the next couple of years to the Common Core State Standards.

It has been eye-opening to be able to see at a glance what we are doing. We are continually reflecting on how long we are spending on certain skill sets. I mean I realized that in the first grade we are spending entirely too much time on nouns. We were all amazed once we mapped it out and realized that we needed to change that for next year.

(Quoting first grade teacher statement made during first grade PLC meeting; Taken from my Personal Journal)

Indifference towards Transformation

During the trajectory of the study (2008-2012), there was some evidence of teacher indifference to a change towards a more collaborative and student-focused PLC structure. During the Compliant Years, the PLC structure did not allow for teachers to voice their opinions, nor was the structure built with the goal for teachers to collaborate. Teachers in
essence were passively receiving information and were obediently following the structure that had been set.

However, during the Treatment and Transformational Years, there was evidence from varied surveys, questionnaires, and my journal notes that teachers acknowledged a positive increase in collaboration, shared leadership, teacher ownership, and capacity as we moved towards transformational PLCs (See Tables 5 and 6). Based on the questionnaires (Table 6), it is evident that there were approximately 15% of teachers that did not feel strongly about issues related to climate and culture within their PLCs and the school setting. A review of my journal entries during this time noted that conversations and interaction were extremely positive during PLCs with the exception of at least one or two teachers in some PLC who were not collaborating, not involved, appeared to not be interested, and sometimes were passive aggressive towards the new PLC structure.

Transformation within the School

It was also very interesting to note there was a great deal of community building among the teachers due to the shift occurring in the PLCs. Teachers were spending more time before and after school together. There were more activities than ever before that teachers developed together in PLCs for parents and students to enjoy after school and on the weekends. This was evidenced by a tripling of afterschool and weekend permits which I processed for student and community events sponsored by the staff.

Ms. V. has just provided me with a proposal for her PLC to sponsor a Harvest Celebration together with her college sorority. Her PLC, in conjunction with her sorority, was able to obtain all sorts of donations for the students. There are over 15 teachers in total that have volunteered to come on a Saturday afternoon to partake in
this event, and we have had 125 students return their registration forms. This is wonderful!

(Personal Journal Entry, October 12, 2011)

I have just put in for a permit for Mr. B. He just informed me that he would like to start a basketball tournament for the third and fourth grade students. I informed him that I would not be able to pay him for that. He assured me that he was not seeking to be paid. He wanted to have this tournament go on three days a week, and he would be working until 5:00 p.m. on those days. He provided me with a schedule of tournaments, and he had already selected the students that would participate. He had created a rationale and explained how there was an aspect that dealt with behavior and good character. He had created all of the emergency permission forms and necessary paperwork. This activity would impact over 75 students for three months! Students and parents will be so appreciative!

(Personal Journal Entry, January 6, 2012)

Although I cannot totally attribute the increase in teacher attendance to the transformation of PLCs and the community that was being built, there was an increase of 3.5% in teacher attendance for the 2011-2012 school year or the Transformation Year. There was also a decrease in teacher tardiness. It appeared that teachers were interested in being at school and working with colleagues. It was also evident that the school was being utilized more for the use of extracurricular activities for students, parents, and the community as a result of teacher created activities. This was a phenomenon that had not been evidenced in past years at LBES.
The sentiment of the four-year PLC shift and transformation was not solely evidenced by the teacher leader responses; the staff echoed the same positive sentiment on their surveys and questionnaires provided throughout the 2011-2012 school year. It was found that 92% of the staff felt that staff development provided through PLCs was responsive to their needs (2011-2012 Instructional Quality/Climate and Culture School Surveys). It was evident, based on the teacher responses to multiple surveys, that there was overall satisfaction with PLCs.

The following ratings are examples that demonstrate alignment with the teacher leaders and teachers on PLCs.

Table 6

*Instructional Quality/Climate and Culture Responses (2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Questions</th>
<th>Teacher Selected Response Average</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rate the amount of sharing and discussing teaching methodologies and strategies occurring during PLCs</td>
<td>90% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Rate the level of collaboration and teachers willingness to work together.</td>
<td>88% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Rate the high level of PLC shared Norms and Values.</td>
<td>85% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rate the level of openness to improvement and their ability to take risks:</td>
<td>83% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Rate the level of trust and respect that teachers felt with one another</td>
<td>85% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rate the quality of time to meet and talk during PLC or meetings.</td>
<td>85% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rate the interdependent teaching roles where teachers work together integrating lessons and team teaching</td>
<td>82% of teachers answered “To a large degree or to a great extent”</td>
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</table>
Finally, when asked about communication structures and opportunities for an exchange of ideas within teams and grade levels/PLCs, 95% of teachers answered, “To a large degree or to a great extent” as it related to teacher empowerment and school autonomy to make decisions regarding their work guided by the norms and beliefs of the PLCs.

Based on the summary of teacher responses, teacher perceptions and beliefs evidenced as much satisfaction and evidence of transformation as that of the teacher leaders’ responses. At the beginning of my tenure, PLC meetings had been run by coaches who limited teachers with little to no participation at all. Throughout the four-year autoethnographic study, external factors, new systemic changes, teacher leaders, ongoing support and focus, PLCs were perceived throughout the Little Bricks Elementary School Teacher population as the forum whereby collaboration, shared leadership, and autonomy were the norm. Teachers were gaining a sense of professional development, collaboration, and a focus on student work they had never experienced before.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of professional learning communities as a strategy for education reform is a natural measure due to its inherent collaborative structure and its primary charge to learn continuously and constantly (Hord, 2004). Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) examined the effectiveness of PLCs through a review of 11 studies focused on PLCs. Although they observed that “few studies moved beyond self-reports of positive impact” (p. 80), based upon their analysis the researchers found evidence of change in teaching practice. Also noted was that this change included “some limited evidence that the impact is measurable beyond teacher perceptions” (p. 88). Additionally, the existing research review in Chapters 1 and 2 speaks specifically of the need and the “how-to” to develop the structures to create PLCs. This research review speaks clearly to essential elements necessary to provide a productive structure for PLCs to exist and provides snapshots of success stories within PLCs. However, even the research explored is devoid of systemic processes and systems that schools can utilize in order for PLCs to be utilized as the main vehicle for teacher development, curriculum development, and collegial and cultural sustainability.

Through professional learning communities, teacher leaders can increase their professional capacity with clear systems in place that delineate norms, protocols, purpose, focused outcomes, and the support of colleagues and administrators. Due to the dynamic changes in the U.S. education system, PLCs can be used to build a pathway to college and career readiness that is focused on improving not only teacher capacity but also improving students’ learning in critical and creative thinking, problem solving and inquiry, and communication and collaboration. The sooner administrators and teachers have a well developed system for addressing current rigorous education national reforms, the better
prepared teachers will be in addressing their own professional growth, impacting student
growth and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mastery.

The purpose of this study was to examine how the professional learning communities at Little Bricks Elementary School shifted from mere compliant teacher response to a mechanism for school-wide reform. Participants were teachers from a large urban elementary school in New Jersey. Little Bricks Elementary School was selected to outline the evolution, over the course of four years, of PLCs and what processes were undertaken by the leader in order to accommodate those changes. The four years are broken down into the following time frames: the Compliant Years (2008-2009), the Treatment Years (2009-2011), and the start of the Transformational Years (2011-2012).

I outlined the research questions guiding this inquiry utilizing the qualitative methodology of autoethnography. Data collections or mode of inquiry were taken from a range of qualitative research methods which included journal reflections, observations, and surveys. A description of the site and individuals who participated in the case study, limitations, and evidentiary warrant of findings were described and delineated by the researcher. The researcher’s autobiographical data were treated with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what was recalled, observed, and told.

The case study was based on the premise that PLCs have the potential for interdependence or transformation when all the systemic elements are in place. This study sought to describe the actions required by the school principal in order to facilitate this shift from compliant PLCs to transformational PLCs for successful change to occur. This chapter presents a discussion of the study’s major themes through the lens of the two research questions. The questions that guided this research were the following:
1. How did professional learning communities evolve over four years (2008-2012) at Little Bricks Elementary School?

2. How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the development and implementation of professional learning communities over four years (2008-2012)?

**Discussion**

Considering the many potential benefits of professional learning communities (PLCs), this study sought to explore how Little Bricks Elementary School shifted from mere compliant teacher response to PLCs towards a true mechanism of professional growth characterized by interdependence, autonomy, and teacher collaboration. Over a four-year period, PLC meetings were transformed from compliant meetings with little buy-in from teachers to communities of teachers working together towards collective goals. Initially, teachers shared through survey data how they were not benefitting from PLCs in the manner that they were being implemented. Throughout the Treatment Years, teacher reflection on PLCs was described by teachers via questionnaires and surveys as merely organizational meetings administered by coaches with no teacher autonomy and an environment that lacked shared leadership.

The transformation of PLCs is evidenced through the lens of teachers and via my eyewitness account as the principal of the school as it occurred over time. Data collection from three online survey instruments, various questionnaires, and my personal journal reflections illuminated the perceptions and experiences of these teachers and provided valuable insight regarding teacher leadership and professional learning communities before and after transformation occurred.
Research Question 1 Discussed

Research Question 1: How did professional learning communities evolve over a four-year period (2008-2012) at Little Bricks Elementary School?

The first research question sought to understand the process and conditions that facilitated the development of teachers and teacher leaders into transformational PLCs. In order to answer this question, I had to address how teachers defined their role as participants through their work in a professional learning community. The importance of this question was supported by the first identified dimension of Hord’s PLC framework: supportive and shared leadership. According to Hord (1997), supportive and shared leadership involves leaders who define and clarify essential tasks while empowering others.

During the Compliant Years, little to no evidence is cited regarding how teacher leaders had assisted in moving their schools forward either within or beyond the classroom as a result of their efforts, or lack thereof, in their PLCs. Throughout the Treatment Years and more so during the Transformational Years, the five individuals that were teacher leaders in this study affirmed their roles as a teacher leader through various tasks and duties.

The focus on student issues during PLCs started to come about as Teacher Leaders became part of the decision-making team, and this shared leadership increased through our Professional Development Committee (PDC) during the Treatment Years. The evidence towards transformation was demonstrated by the student-focused work that was produced during PLCs in the Transformational Years. The surveys conducted by teachers as well as the questionnaires of teacher leaders during this time demonstrated a focus towards students and collegial collaboration in the work discussed and completed during the PLCs.
During the Transformational Years teachers attested to the increased ability to share best practices as well as individual student work with one another via staff development, PLCs and faculty meetings. An opportunity to “open classroom doors” and “walk into each other’s world” became a new form of collaboration and staff development for teachers. During the Transformational Years, teachers tripled the number of requests for preparation periods in order to conduct peer observations of one another.

During the Transformational Years, teacher leaders were given a sense of voice and interdependence in the decision making of the school. They shared that the PDC was a time where they could learn how to lead their own PLCs through the techniques that they observed the principal modeling. It was also the forum where most school-wide decisions were made. Importantly, teacher leaders were kept abreast of the vision and mission of the school and were able to have a sense of direction in order to lead their own PLCs, yet maintain a sense of autonomy.

Finally, in examining the first research question which sought to summarize the transformational shift that occurred in PLCs at Little Bricks Elementary School, it was evident that the collaborative culture and climate that developed within the PLC structure also trickled into the very fabric of all activities of the school. This was evidenced through increased teacher attendance and decreased tardiness. Teacher-led activities that served the school community as well as activities that were planned amongst the staff also increased. This led to the conclusion that teachers were building closer professional and personal ties with one another and becoming more connected on a professional and personal level, which ultimately led to an improved sense of collaboration; thus on a trajectory towards a transformational community of learners.
Research Question 2 Discussed

Research Question 2: How did the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School play a role in fostering the development and implementation of professional learning communities over a four-year period (2008-2012)?

The second question examined the principal’s role in facilitating the transformational shift that occurred in the PLCs. In order for this to occur, it was necessary for a clear, coherent vision with systemic processes to be laid out for all teachers during the Treatment Years. The focus was to build capacity in adult learners intertwined with accountability in order to provide a clear sense of shared leadership to be articulated and put in place. For this reason, the work accomplished through PLC’s required supportive conditions.

Norms and procedures are considered best practices for PLC’s; however, a lack of buy-in was problematic during the Treatment Years and contradicted with the second dimension of Hord’s PLC framework: shared values and vision. Literature supports the notion of teachers as leaders through professional learning communities (Hord, 1997; Lashway, 1998). However, the data for this study reflected limited opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders within their learning communities during the Compliant Years of PLCs at LBES. Therefore, a push towards shared leadership was essential during the Treatment Years.

As the principal, I predetermined how much autonomy I would grant to teachers and when it was appropriate to do so. In addition, I had a clearly defined plan on how to build capacity to support teachers to lead. Most importantly, I clearly delineated the areas in which I would lead as the principal and which areas I would open up for shared leadership during the Treatment Years. Deciphering and maneuvering through these delicate decisions were at the heart of our transition from a culture of compliance to transformation of PLCs during the
Treatment Years. I, the principal, through this journey carefully planned how to support and gradually release teacher autonomy in a manner that would foster trust in their ability to lead during the Treatment Years.

It then became important to first make teachers feel a sense of understanding during the Treatment Years of the new vocabulary and focus areas that would be introduced into the school during the Transformational Years. A Teacher Leadership Institute (TLI) was established for potential teacher leaders. The purpose was to build capacity and train a core group of individuals to lead the transformation during the 2011-2012 school year. This initiative or systemic process served as a tool to provide teachers with the knowledge of the areas and approaches that would need to be addressed in the coming year. There was a structure of learning and dialogue which served as a stepping-stone and powerful tool for teachers to gain an understanding and capacity prior to moving towards our shift in the Transformational Year. This process also served as a tool to help in the development of who would eventually be the key players and teacher leaders in the coming year as we moved towards transformation. As a result, by the time we moved into our Transformational Year, there were a group of key stakeholders that had a very clear understanding of the structures and best practices that would serve us well.

Teacher leaders were provided with resources and skills to help them lead others effectively through ongoing mentoring sessions, teacher leader retreats, the weekly vertical PLC meetings, and the PDC meetings. As time progressed during the Transformational Year, there was evidence of growth as teacher leaders articulated how they experienced shared leadership and successful strides in their PLCs. Teacher leaders were able to articulate the
differences between their “compliant” roles as teacher leaders in the past and the roles they had taken on now as true leaders.

As the principal I made a concerted effort to assure that adequate time was provided to coach and mentor teacher leaders. The data from questionnaires, PLC documents, and my anecdotal journal reflections suggest that there was a significant positive shift in collaboration, attitude, and perceptions of PLCs that year. Teacher leaders attributed the level of success to the individual coaching and the individualized staff developments via retreats which focused on developing a high level of leadership in their PLCs.

As the principal at Little Bricks Elementary School, I had a clear, coherent master plan of the shift to meaningful transformational PLCs. Program coherence is one of the essential components in making the shift (DuFour, 1997). Autonomy for teacher leaders allowed for PLC meetings to transcend beyond “meeting for the sake of meeting” or for providing a set of “managerial” reminders or tasks to be the definition of ongoing PLCs to a collective inquiry amongst teachers, whereby the goals of the school are at the forefront of PLC efforts (DeFour et al., 2008).

As a pro-active principal attempting to move PLCs to a more collaborative environment, it was essential that true autonomy was provided to the teacher leaders who led PLCs. The expectation was that most of the agenda items were to be focused on student items that were to build teacher capacity and further the student agenda. Teachers were provided with various opportunities to speak to their commitment to collaboration, agreed upon core values, and a shift in beliefs through an agreed upon Teacher Belief Statement, created during a staff development session. These beliefs and core values were always evident via newsletters, signs posted in teachers’ rooms, and affirming messages included in their meeting agendas, as
well as messages from the administrative team. The repetitive nature of the core values and belief statements and commitment to our collaborative shift to Transformative PLCs provided a clear message to all adults in the school that the shift to transformational PLCs was not just a fleeting initiative but a structure that was part of the fabric of the school.

The common goals, vision, and values teachers possess at LBES ultimately influenced the nature of relationship building within the PLCs. Attempting to move PLCs to a more transformational system of change was a high priority at Little Bricks Elementary School. Social capital was referred to as social obligations or connections that were linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships (Bourdieu, as cited in Smith, 2007, and Lin, 2000). When surveyed about opportunities to connect with others within PLCs, over half reported a gained sense of collegiality. At least three quarters of teachers experienced mutual trust amongst colleagues within their PLC. Overall, the data from the surveys suggested that teachers connected with one another in their learning communities as a result of the transformation shift that was created. The data also suggest that from the very beginning of the shift towards transformational PLCs, the aspect of social capital played a large role in enhancing collaboration and thus producing positive outcomes in PLCs.

**Conclusions**

Throughout the research cited and my own autoethnographic study, there is a clear focus on promoting shared leadership and leadership for the entire constituency of teachers. In this true leadership shift, there is an intentional effort to formalize and institutionalize teacher leadership roles rather than maintain loose responsibilities with no designated title or clearly defined leadership capacity (Smylie & Denny, 1990). Wasley(1991) defines this leadership style as “those who enable their colleagues to improve professional practice by doing things they would not ordinarily do on their own . . . and are those who help redesign
schools, mentor their colleagues, engage in problem solving at the school level, and provide professional growth activities for colleagues” (as cited in Silva et al., 2000). It is this shift towards true teacher leadership that is required in professional learning communities to make lasting change occur.

Through my research, I suggest that an integral piece should be included as the sixth dimension to Hord’s (1997) framework (Table 7) to build capacity and provide intentional leadership skills to a specific group of teacher leaders with additional coaching and mentoring to lead professional learning communities.

Although the focus of PLCs is to have a sense of shared roles and responsibilities towards accomplishing shared beliefs, vision, and goals (Hord, 1997), there must be individuals in the teacher ranks who will be provided with greater autonomy as leader and be responsible for working with their colleagues in leading their communities of learning. They will also work with senior leadership as a liaison to their PLCs and form part of the leadership team of the school. The literature review and my study’s findings found that the term “shared leadership” is described with a focus on teachers and administrators working together through shared decision-making and collegial support. However, the literature is devoid of practical examples of how to implement shared practices without the use of a teacher leader/facilitator who guides colleagues through the process of shared leadership. The development of transformational teacher leadership requires an increased understanding that in order to nurture instructional excellence, the school culture must support continuous collaboration amongst teachers and recognize that they are the primary and most important individuals involved in reforming schools (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Silva et al., 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).
An additional dimension that I would add to Hord’s Dimensions (See Table 7), would be in the realm of having capacity, beliefs, values, and vision amongst senior leadership in order for the ongoing development of transformational professional learning communities to move forward. It is key for the principal to have a clear vision for how he or she sees PLCs forming the nucleus of his or her school improvement plan. The principal also needs to ensure that the administrative staff is on board and has the capacity to coach teachers and teacher leaders forward as time progresses. Merely having the principal move the agenda forward and being the sole person carrying the vision will not provide the necessary consistency required for improvement. It is essential for the entire administrative staff to have a clarity of the school vision and goals and have the expertise themselves to move teachers to the level of capacity required in order to arrive at the breakthrough results possible through transformational PLCs. As a result, a clear goal of embracing the tenets of the beliefs, values, and vision are agreed upon by all stakeholders including senior leaders, extending the message(s) of the principal.
Table 7

*The Seven Dimensions of a Transformational Professional Learning Community (adopted from Hord (1997)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Learning Community Dimension</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shared Beliefs, Values &amp; Vision</td>
<td>Embraced by all stakeholders on student learning that is used to guide teachers’ practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Capacity, Shared Beliefs, Values &amp; Vision of Senior Leadership</strong></td>
<td>Led by the principal’s vision, all senior leadership have a clear level of understanding and conceptualization of the focus areas that are to be the basis for ongoing coaching and resources provided to teachers and specifically teacher leaders. A clear goal of embracing the tenets of the beliefs, values and vision that are agreed upon by all stakeholders and thus as senior leaders, thus extend the message(s) of the principal in their absence on a consistent basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shared &amp; Supportive Leadership</td>
<td>School administration and teachers both lead the school through shared decision-making and collegial support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Ongoing coaching and building of capacity of Teacher Leaders/Teacher Facilitators</strong></td>
<td>An intentional focus on providing ongoing coaching and development on the tier of teachers who have the potential to help senior administration enable their colleagues to improve professionally and therefore help redesign schools by mentoring their colleagues, engaging in problem solving at the school level and provide professional growth activities for colleagues. These individuals are also directly involved in the school’s core leadership team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Collective Learning and its application</td>
<td>The school community continuously and collaboratively engage in the inquiry process in order to apply new knowledge and carry out the vision of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Supportive Conditions</td>
<td>The physical conditions of the school and the human capital of those involved enable the function of PLCs to operate in a manner that is most beneficial for all.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Shared Practice</td>
<td>Teachers’ behavior and practice is reviewed by colleagues in a non-evaluative manner. Sharing of practices is a process which is promoted through PLCs and collegial visits that are then discussed for teacher developmental purposes)</td>
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** Dimensions added to Hord’s (1997) theory and thus form the new model of the Seven Dimensions of transformational PLCs.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The results of this study of LBES identified the systemic changes and leadership role in the evolution over a four-year period from a compliant PLC towards a transformational PLC. Several recommendations may be offered in the area of supporting and laying down the foundation for purposeful and productive PLCs in schools.

As schools address education reforms and dilemmas, administrators and other stakeholders need to carefully create conditions that promote interdependence for all teachers.
to collaborate and have strong internal commitment to the success of the school. Instituting a PLC in the school with continuous support in building teacher leaders’ and teachers’ capacity and focused school and student goals has to be addressed to create opportunities for education reforms, such as new evaluation frameworks and Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The following suggestions are listed in order of importance to put in place a systemic process that supports the ongoing shift from compliant professional learning communities to transformational PLCs.

The principal’s visionary leadership and systemic process is critical for the success of transformational professional learning communities. According to Tom Donahoe (1993), “Schools are trapped by a leadership dilemma: They require skilled, effective principals in order to outgrow their utter dependence on those principals” (p. 300). Thus, much of a school’s success and culture is fashioned by the principal’s aptitude to empower and build capacity in teachers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Lambert, 2003). With this in mind, principals should work with staff to create structures to foster distributed leadership within PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008) and should embrace shared leadership as an effective method for empowering teachers.

To address the issue of transforming PLCs, administrators in different schools should empower and provide autonomy to teachers to address internal commitment and autonomous decision-making in the success of the school and student learning. Based on this study, the principal gradually released and modeled leadership skills and collaboration within PLCs that positively impacted teacher leaders’ and teachers’ level of professional collaboration, leadership, and professional growth. However, the principal must make decisions as to which responsibilities will be shared and which will remain purely administrative. This leads to a model of interdependence, which is defined as the right amount of autonomy and collaboration
within PLCs that result in shared best practices and strong internal commitment to the success of the school.

Proper program implementation and coherence is critical to the success of professional learning communities. School leaders must recognize, communicate, and implement effective dimensions of a PLC. Based on literature and data presented in this study, such dimensions include shared vision, shared mission, clearly defined goals, a focus on student learning, and a collective buy-in from all stakeholders (DuFour et al., 2000; Hord, 1997). In addition to these identified dimensions, school leaders must understand that the work of PLCs should also be data-informed, standards-driven, and focused on instruction.

Enhanced teacher leadership is another added value of PLCs. Newmann and his associates (1996) found that in schools with strong PLCs, school leaders paid closer attention to school culture and the level of its professional development structure throughout. School administrators should therefore invest and devote time in developing teacher leadership within the organizational capacity of schools and also invest time towards continuous support in developing and norming the growth of their leadership team in order to support the momentum of the professional vision and goals of the school.

The principal’s supportive role is one of many necessary human resources for restructuring staff for professional learning communities. Based on this study, I recommend that school principals embrace a shared decision-making approach with teachers as well as clearly identify teachers as leaders in school reform efforts. All teachers should be viewed as stakeholders and as a resource for school improvement, which ultimately will increase the leadership capacity of all—teacher leaders, teachers, administrative team, and the principal.
I recommend that principals shift their notion of management styles and perspectives on leadership, which requires addressing the misconceptions associated with teacher leadership in schools. Discussing transformational changes must address both a shift in how traditional roles of administrators are viewed, as well as those of teacher leaders within schools. As noted throughout this research, teacher leadership is more than a title. It is embedded in the capacity to create change that impacts students. Based on the work of Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (1988), principals can empower teachers by increasing teacher involvement in school-based processes and by increasing shared decision making in curricular and managerial areas. Principals can shift the culture of their schools by establishing a culture for collaboration amongst teachers and administrators and by providing support and encouragement for teachers.

It is important for the school administrator to consider the relationships between school administration and teachers as an element in transforming and re-culturing schools. A trusting relationship between administration, PLC teacher leaders, and teachers sparks the cultural shifts needed in order to produce strong communities of practice. According to a study conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Lab, transforming a school’s culture begins with the tone of the relationship between the school leaders and teachers (Muhammad, 2009).

It is evident, however, that culture and the move towards high social capital through PLCs does not occur merely with the assumption that implementing technical changes will foster the cultural changes needed in order to maintain productive learning communities. As pointed out by Anthony Muhammad (2009), “cultural changes are necessary to effect an improvement in student performance, but they produce very few positive results when used by people who do not believe in the intended outcome of the change” (p. 14). As opposed to
technical changes which are more obvious and easy to control, cultural changes are much more difficult to achieve and entail an ongoing process of reform and renewal within schools.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The study’s methodology was autoethnographic in nature. Anecdotal personal journal entries, questionnaires, surveys, and PLC documents were triangulated to support the evolution of a compliant to a transformational professional learning community. Findings in this research were extensively analyzed and discussed for the reader to understand how to shift towards a transformational PLC in a school setting. Triangulation of various data not only supported literature review but extended on it as shown in Table 7. As a result, further studies should be conducted to examine factors impacting the shift towards a transformational PLC. Autoethnographic, qualitative, and quantitative studies would give school administrators an idea of specific recommendations on how to develop PLCs for a variety of subgroups or school settings.

In this particular study, many teachers felt empowered when autonomy was provided. At times, despite a lack of shared leadership provided from their administrators, teachers craved autonomy and felt empowered. However, there were still some that did not. Further research is needed in order to investigate factors that promote teacher leadership in PLCs. A one-group pretest-posttest design should be explored to identify teacher autonomy and/or teacher leadership at the beginning of the study, then organize “treatment,” and last measure their growth or perception at the end of the study. It is also recommended that the measurement tool should explore and examine factors that intrinsically empower teachers in order to inform the researcher on the needs of the teacher.
This study was conducted in a PreK-4 urban elementary school with three administrators, 600 students, 30 teachers, and five teacher leaders. Further research involving other school demographics should be conducted to determine whether the factors and findings in this study are consistent in shifting towards transformational PLCs. Doing such research would examine the nature of PLCs within varying environments in order to capture deeper explanations regarding the impact of school culture on teacher leadership. Also, research on individual PLCs within a school should be explored to identify and compare which PLCs are moving towards transformational PLCs. Research should be extended and conducted in different school settings, such as elementary schools (PreK-8), middle school (Grades 6-8), and high school (Grades 9-12) to conclude whether the same factors affect the shift towards transformational PLCs.

Little Bricks Elementary School is located in an urban area in New Jersey. Demographics, such as inner city versus suburban differences, were not considered as part of the data analysis. Conducting quantitative or qualitative research in a suburban area can be helpful to identify and/or capture deeper explanations regarding the different barriers teachers experienced in their PLCs. In addition, in an urban or suburban school setting, factors such as the age of the schools, school grades, CCSS, and high-stakes testing can be further researched to understand the experiences and perceptions of teachers on shifting towards transformational PLCs.

Another recommendation for future research is to examine the differences among schools with principals that have professional support versus principals who do not, in order to shift the development of transformational PLCs, teacher leaders, and shared leadership. As identified in this study, the principal’s own mentorship with a local university’s mentoring
program was paramount in shaping the transformational shift of PLCs, thus creating additional support mechanisms for the researcher. However, this particular study did not analyze non-mentored principals attempting to transform PLC structures in order to offer an opposing perspective.

Last, a consideration for future research is methodology. A longitudinal autoethnographic research was conducted for this particular study. The use of questionnaires, surveys, PLC documents, teacher feedback, and anecdotal journal entries were utilized to offer an in-depth insight into the perspectives and experiences of teacher leaders in professional learning communities and deepened the researcher’s understanding of the topic. Further research should be executed in the same manner to conclude if the principal’s leadership, systemic processes, interdependence, and increased social capital and school culture played a significant role in shifting towards transformation PLCs.

**Recommendations for Future Policy**

For school improvement to occur, the leadership of the school principal is crucial (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, 2005; Hord, 1997; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). With increased levels of accountability relative to student achievement and teacher quality, schools are continually searching for ways to meet these increased expectations and school reform initiatives. School policy should be created using research-based strategies to enhance the effectiveness of teacher practices and to improve student learning. According to Edmonds (1979), a main element among effective schools is strong leadership, especially the principal, who is important in setting the vision, core values, and in organizing resources. This case study demonstrated the importance of the principal’s leadership in the school studied and its relationship to the
evolution of professional learning communities as a haven for educators to enrich their professional growth and to collaborate in order to enhance student learning.

At LBES the school principal demonstrated a willingness to share the leadership responsibilities (Sergiovanni, 1993) of the school through the PLCs which were organized around relationships rather than organized around leadership structures. This was accomplished through negotiated arrangements between teachers and administrator and not merely as a response to being compliant by teachers, thus categorizing PLCs as transformational.

Transformational leaders have power and facilitate a school development process that engages the human potential and commitment of teachers (Leithwood, 2005). Recommendations for policy would therefore include the following:

- Federal, state, and local education agencies may consider offering incentive-based programs to school districts that engage in research based practices that foster the development of transformational PLCs and peer feedback programs.
- Include a requirement in New Jersey associated with principal certification that provides candidates with skills to develop professional development programs that emphasize theory and strategies associated with a more transformational style of school leadership. If collaborative environments are seen as breeding grounds for professional learning communities, school leadership programs at universities and state-level organizations should include specific courses dedicated to developing a school leader’s capacity for creating schools where positive, collaborative school cultures exist.
• Convene a review committee comprised of the New Jersey Department of Education, university leadership professors, principal member organizations (i.e., NASSP, NAESP, and NJPSA) and novice and veteran principals to conduct a system overview of PLC implementation and provide a best practice overview.

• Create New Jersey Department of Education leadership seminars around the ideals of implementing transformational professional learning communities that are at the heart of teacher collaboration and growth with the goal of meeting student needs. These seminars would provide guidelines to prepare school leaders in the areas of shared leadership, instructional leadership, ethical leadership, distributed leadership, and visionary leadership. This would also be a pre-requisite for all principal candidates to complete as a requirement for principal certification. Providing the seminars through the Department of Education ensures training consistency and guarantees all prospective principals will have been exposed to similar leadership training for the betterment of all New Jersey students and schools.

• School district policies and practices should encourage the development of teacher leaders within the school by providing financial and professional support to these teachers.

Summary

In summary, sustaining effective, collaborative professional learning communities in schools requires a delicate balance between the leadership style of the principal, the organizational structure of the school, and the school’s culture. The principal’s role is critical in the success of teacher leadership and schools as a whole. Principals must be willing to provide ongoing needed support and coaching to teachers and teacher leaders, despite the
added demands of being a school leader. Therefore, shared leadership is a transformative process that must be embraced by principals in order to take teacher collaboration to a productive level. Principals must be willing to let go of the old paradigm of leadership by empowering teachers to take on new leadership roles within their schools.

The literature and research support the effectiveness of PLCs for teacher development and thus for student success. The data from this research suggest that PLCs helped in cultivating a true sense of empowerment for teachers and teacher leaders at Little Bricks Elementary School and the literature and research support the effectiveness of PLCs for students. However, effective PLCs do not exist in schools that are not willing to shift towards a collaborative culture where learning exists for all adults and students alike. Collaboration amongst all stakeholders, shared leadership, and a strong network focused on student learning are essential in moving schools forward. The “network” or social capital that principals and teachers possess is the foundation of shifting the culture of schools. As principal leaders adjust to the changes brought about by current education reform, teachers will also be empowered to lead from within and outside of the classroom.
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Appendices
Appendix A – District Consent Letter

October 16, 2012

Yolanda Méndez, Ed.S., Principal
Roberto Clemente Elementary School
257 Summer Ave.
Newark, NJ 07104

Dear Ms. Mendez,

This letter confirms that you have the permission of the Newark Superintendent’s Office to conduct your dissertation study, “Implementing Transformational Professional Learning Communities in an Urban Elementary School: An Autobiography,” using data sources from Roberto Clemente Elementary School.

I understand that you plan to use the following types of data: anonymous questionnaires, surveys and interview data.

This permission is contingent upon your success in receiving approval for this study from Seton Hall University’s Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Camí Anderson
State District Superintendent

Changing Hearts and Minds to Value Education
Appendix B - Surveys

Center for Improving School Culture

CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN

SCHOOL CULTURE TRIAGE SURVEY

Directions: Please circle a number to the right of each statement that most closely characterizes the practice in your school.

Rating: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always or Almost Always

Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.  
   
2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.  
   
3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.  
   
4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.  
   
5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.  

Affiliative Collegiality

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school’s values  
   
2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others’ company.  
   
3. Our school reflects a true “sense” of community.  
   
4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff?  
   
5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.  
   
6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.
Self-Determination/Efficacy

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.  1  2  3  4  5

2. School members are interdependent and value each other.  1  2  3  4  5

3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.  1  2  3  4  5

4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.  1  2  3  4  5

5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.  1  2  3  4  5

6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.  1  2  3  4  5
Scoring the triage survey

The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After utilizing the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggests the following:

17 – 40 = Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school’s culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing the culture.

41 – 59 = Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school’s culture to determine which area is in most need of improvement.

60 – 75 = Monitor and maintain making positive adjustments.

76 – 85 = Amazing! A score of 75 was the highest ever recorded.

School culture is of such importance that it requires constant monitoring. Yet before engaging in an elaborate and extensive analysis of the school culture, this quick assessment of current status can assist in determining the wise allocation of time and resources.
### CISC

**School Culture Triage Survey Tally Form**

#### Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.
   
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2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.
   
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3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.
   
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4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.
   
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5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.
   
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**TOTAL:** _____
Affiliative Collegiality

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school’s values
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others’ company.
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

3. Our school reflects a true “sense” of community.
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff?
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.
   1   2   3   4   5   = _____ ÷ _____ = ______

TOTAL= ________
Self-Determination/Efficacy

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.

2. School members are interdependent and value each other.

3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.

4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.

5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.

6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.

Professional Learning Communities Survey

Based on the article: Building Professional Community in Schools by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis and Anthony Bryk.

This survey will help you think about and assess the extent to which each of the major factors associated with professional learning community—critical elements, human resources, and structural conditions is currently present at your school.

1.0 CRITICAL ELEMENTS

1.1 Reflective Dialogue

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1.2 Dep-Privatization of Practice

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1.3 Collective Focus on Student Learning

c. Teachers assume that all students can learn at reasonably high levels & that teachers can help them.

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1.4 Collaboration

d. Teachers not only work together to develop shared understandings of students, curriculum & instructional policy, but also produce materials & activities that improve instruction, curriculum, & assessment.

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1.5 Shared Norms and Values

e. Through words & actions teachers affirm their common values concerning critical educational issues and in support of their collective focus on student learning.

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2.0 HUMAN RESOURCES

2.1 Openness to Improvement
   a. Teachers take risks in trying new techniques and ideas and make efforts to learn more about their profession.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

2.2 Trust and Respect
   b. Teachers feel honored for their expertise within the school as well as within the district, the parent community and other significant groups.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

2.3 Cognitive and Skill Base
   c. Within the school there are formal methods for sharing expertise among faculty members so that marginal and ineffective teachers can improve.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

2.4 Supportive Leadership
   d. The school leadership keeps the school focused on shared purpose, continuous improvement, and collaboration.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

2.5 Socialization
   e. The staff imparts a sense that new teachers are an important and productive part of a meaningful school community.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

3.0 STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

3.1 Time to Meet and Talk
   a. There is a formal process that provides substantial & regularly scheduled blocks of time for educators to conduct on-going self-examination & self-renewal.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

3.2 Physical Proximity
   b. Teachers have common spaces, rooms, or areas for discussion of educational practices.
      Not at All  Somewhat  50%  To a large Degree  To a Great Extent
      1           2         3                4                           5

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community such as a Critical Friends Group® and facilitated by a skilled coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsfharmony.org.
3.3 Interdependent Teaching Roles

- There are recurring formal situations in which teachers work together (team teaching, integrated lessons etc.)

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3.4 Communication Structures

- There are structures & opportunities for an exchange of ideas, both within and across such organizational units as teams, grade levels, & subject departments.

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3.5 Teacher Empowerment & School Autonomy

- Teachers have autonomy to make decisions regarding their work guide by the norms and beliefs of the professional community.

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*Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community such as a Critical Friends Group® and facilitated by a skilled coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsfreform.org.*
THE NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS
ROBERTO CLEMENTE ELEMENTARY
257 Summer Avenue
Newark, NJ 07104
Phone (973) 268-5290
FAX (973) 483-5524

Staff Development Day
Feedback Survey
January 25, 2012

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I. The session provided me with information which was informative about PLCs: ________

Comments:

II. I will be able to utilize the information gained from today's session immediately in optimizing the effectiveness of my professional growth in PLCs: ________

Comments:

III. I am clear as to what the expectations are of me during PLCs based on the knowledge gained from the session? ________

Comments:

IV. I have found that I have grown professionally during PLCs? ________

Comments:

V. There have been clear student inroads in my classroom as a result of my learning in PLCs? ________

Comments:

*Changing Hearts and Minds to Value Education*
Grade Level Facilitator Training
Feedback Survey
December 9, 2011

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I. The session provided me with information which was informative about how I should lead PLCs: _____

   Comments:

II. I will be able to utilize the information gained from today’s session immediately in optimizing the effectiveness in leading PLCs: _____

   Comments:

III. I am clear as to what the expectations are of me as a Facilitator of a PLCs based on the knowledge gained from the session? _____

   Comments:

IV. I have found that I have grown as a Leader through PDCs/Mentoring and Facilitator Training for PLCs? _____

   Comments:

V. There have been clear improvements in collaboration, collegiality and student focus my PLC this year? _____

   Comments:

   *Changing Hearts and Minds to Value Education*
How are the Children??
Staff Development Day
Feedback Survey
September 1, 2011

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I. The session provided me with information which was informative: __________

Comments:

II. I will be able to utilize the information gained from today’s session immediately in the classroom: __________

Comments:

III. I am clear as to what the expectations are of me based on the knowledge gained from the session? __________

Comments:

IV. Additional Comments:

Changing Hearts and Minds to Value Education
Roberto Clemente Elementary School Instructional Quality Survey

On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
Rate questions 1 through 18 as they relate to the classroom.
Rate questions 19 through 49 as they relate to the whole school.
* Required

Check your role in the school: *
✓ Teacher
✓ Specialty Teacher (Art, ESL, etc.)
✓ Administrator
✓ Other: ________________________________

1. The classroom learning goals and objectives are clearly defined. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
✓ ?
✓ 1
✓ 2
✓ 3
✓ 4
✓ 5

2. The classroom goals focus on improving student performance. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
✓ ?
✓ 1
✓ 2
✓ 3
✓ 4
✓ 5

3. The teacher has input in the learning goals and objectives of the classroom. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
✓ ?
✓ 1

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFrb0VQTHFOU0ZXc... 10/8/2012
2
3
4
5

4. The classroom learning goals and objectives support the school’s goals.∗
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4 5

5. Most parents are aware of the classroom instructional goals.∗
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4 5

6. The teacher, students and parents share a value system emphasizing academic achievement.∗
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4 5

7. Feedback from the principal’s instructional observations emphasize improving instruction and increasing student achievement.∗
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

8. Feedback from the vice principal's instructional observations emphasize improving instruction and increasing student achievement.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

9. The teacher views the principal as having relevant instructional expertise.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

10. The teacher views the vice principal as having relevant instructional expertise.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFr60VQTHFOU0ZXc... 10/8/2012
11. The standards for learning in my classroom are both challenging and attainable.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

12. An orderly, productive working atmosphere is generally maintained, and time spent on classroom management is minimal.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

13. The classroom has a task-oriented but relaxed atmosphere where students find encouragement and little criticism.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

14. Classroom awards are set at several levels of performance to provide all students opportunities for success and recognition.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
15. Student recognition is based on comparison to standards rather than comparison to peers.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

16. Student accomplishments (academic and behavioral) in the special programs (special education, etc.) are also recognized in the regular classroom.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

17. Parents are informed about student successes.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

18. The teacher follows routines for collecting, summarizing and using student achievement information to focus new instructional efforts.*

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFrXb0VQTJFOU0ZXC... 10/8/2012
19. The school’s goals focus on improving student performance.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4 5

20. The principal has a clear understanding of the school’s goals and is able to clearly articulate them.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4 5

21. The vice principal has a clear understanding of the school’s goals and is able to clearly articulate them.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection.
Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

? 1 2 3 4
22. The teachers and other staff view the principal as having relevant management skills.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 5
☐ 4
☐ 3
☐ 2
☐ 1
☐ ?

23. The teachers and other staff view the vice principal as having relevant management skills.
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 5
☐ 4
☐ 3
☐ 2
☐ 1
☐ ?

24. The school has provisions for recognizing excellent teaching.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 5
☐ 4
☐ 3
☐ 2
☐ 1
☐ ?

25. The school has provisions for recognizing excellent support service.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 2
☐ 1
☐ ?
26. Student accomplishments in the special programs (special education, Title I extended, migrant, etc.) are recognized in schoolwide settings.
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST). Make a selection.
   Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
   1 2 3 4 5

27. School awards are set at several levels of performance to provide many students opportunities for success and recognition.
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST). Make a selection.
   Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
   1 2 3 4 5

28. The principal initiates organized and systematic school and program improvement procedures.
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST). Make a selection.
   Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.
   1 2 3 4 5

29. A variety of methods (test results, grade reports, attendance, etc.) are used to spot program strengths and weaknesses.
   1 2 3 4 5
30. **Assessment results are used to evaluate the programs and to target areas for improvement.**
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.

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31. **The principal carefully monitors new practices and the instructional materials adoptions.**
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.

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32. **Program improvement efforts are periodically reviewed, progress is noted, and the focus of improvement is renewed or redirected.**
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select 7: UNSURE.

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33. Local evaluation results are compared to state and national results as a gage for program effectiveness. *
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection.
   Otherwise select?: UNSURE.
   ○ ?
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

34. The curriculum in the special programs (special education, Title I extended, migrant, etc.) is congruent with the regular school curriculum. *
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection.
   Otherwise select?: UNSURE.
   ○ ?
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

35. Special program teachers know how their instructional objectives fit in with the regular curriculum. *
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection.
   Otherwise select?: UNSURE.
   ○ ?
   ○ 1
   ○ 2
   ○ 3
   ○ 4
   ○ 5

36. Special attention is focused on building good continuity across grade levels and programs. *
   On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection.
   Otherwise select?: UNSURE.
   ○ ?

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFrb0VQTHFO0ZXC...  10/8/2012
37. Specific provisions (time and resources) are outlined for coordination between teachers in the special and regular classrooms. On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

38. Collaborative curriculum planning and decision making are typical among regular and special program teachers. On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

39. Parents are aware of opportunities to access community and support services their families may need (school coordination with outside agencies). On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLN6Frb0VQTHFOU0ZXc... 10/8/2012
40. The principal and staff both value and emphasize staff development training and teacher skill building. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

41. Staff development opportunities funded by the school are responsive to staff needs. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

42. School staff development activities are linked to the school or district improvement plan. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3
○ 4
○ 5

43. Staff development and training are supported with adequate time and other necessary resources. *
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.
○ ?
○ 1
○ 2
○ 3

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFrb0VQTHFOU0Zxc... 10/8/2012
44. The staff shares and implements the information and skills from staff development opportunities.
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

45. Grade Level Meetings are productive collaborative work environments.
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

46. Grade Level Leaders are essential and provide necessary leadership during Grade Level meetings.
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

47. Grade Level Meetings provide Professional Development opportunities for us.
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), Make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dEFLNWFrb0VQTHF0U0ZXc.. 10/8/2012
48. The principal and administrators have built in systems to enhance the morale among staff.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5

49. The morale is currently high.*
On a scale from 1 to 5, (1: being the LOWEST and 5: being the HIGHEST), make a selection. Otherwise select ?: UNSURE.

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
1. How will you prepare to lead your Grade Level Team?

2. If you have been a Grade level Leader in the past, describe what your role as leader has been.

3. What changes would you suggest be made for the coming year to help improve Grade Level Meetings.

4. What tools are you looking forward to developing in the coming year as you grow or continue to grow in the role of Grade Level Leader?
Roberto Clemente Elementary School

Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaires

June 14, 2011

1. Currently, do you feel prepared to lead your Grade Level Team? Please provide details.

2. Without coaches in the school next year, how will your roles as leaders impacted?

3. If you have been a Grade level Leader in the past, describe what your role as leader has been.

4. What changes would you suggest be made for the coming year to help in your personal development, in order to enhance the Level of collaboration and planning.
Roberto Clemente Elementary School

Grade Level Leader Feedback Questionnaires

June 13, 2012

1. What changes occurred in your PLCs this year? Please describe.

2. How was your leadership enhanced, challenged? Please provide detail.

3. Has the focus of PLCs changed to a more student focused approach? Please explain and provide detail.

4. What can Senior Leadership do to enhance and perhaps continue the shift in PLCs in order to support the work that you do as Grade Level Facilitators (Teacher Leaders)?

5. Other Comments?
Appendix C – Survey

Permission E-mails

XFINITY Connect

Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission

From: Yolanda Méndez <yolymendez@comcast.net>  Fri, Jan 30, 2015 01:31 PM
Subject: Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission
To: cwrider@aol.com
Cc: yolymendez@comcast.net

Thank you Dr. Wagner for granting permission for the use of your survey. I will contact you as I move forward on my dissertation research.

I am no longer able to access the survey from the Journal of Staff Development as it is now "Learning Forward". However, that was also a survey that I had downloaded and was hoping to obtain permission for use. I was having a hard time reaching anyone at "Learning Forward" for permission of use.

Thank you for all of your support and assistance.

Yolanda Méndez

From: cwrider@aol.com
To: yolymendez@comcast.net
Sent: Friday, January 30, 2015 1:11:55 PM
Subject: Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission

Ms. Mendez,

Thank you for sending the contact information. The Journal of Staff Development (www.nisd.org/library/publications/jsd/wagner233.cfm) has added the survey, although in different formatting, to their library/archives. Since this is not the original survey, I plan to contact them.

Now, on to the important business of your research. Thank you for the permission agreement. I am intrigued by your study and hope the SCTS will be helpful. I shall attach the survey, tally forms, a scoring example, and suggestions for its administration.

You may want to look at the publication listing on the CISC webpage (www.schoolculture.net) I wish you the very best in your research. If I can ever be of assistance, please let me know.

Kindest regards,

Christopher

---Original Message---
From: Yolanda Méndez <yolymendez@comcast.net>
To: cwrider <cwrider@aol.com>
Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission

From: Yolanda Méndez <yolymendez@comcast.net>  
Subject: Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission  
Fri, Jan 30, 2015 09:59 AM

Luci McKeen, thank you so very much for granting me permission for the use of the survey.  
I will most definitely provide you with the results.  
thank you again,  
Yolanda Méndez

From: "Luci McKeen" <luc@nsrharmony.org>  
To: "Yolanda Méndez" <yolymendez@comcast.net>  
Cc: michele@nsrharmony.org  
Sent: Friday, January 30, 2015 9:46:21 AM  
Subject: Re: Dissertation Survey Tool Permission  

Yolanda, you have our permission to use this survey in this way.

Thank you very much for asking permission, and for forwarding the resulting research and articles. We’re hoping to gather finished research about Critical Friends Group work to put onto our website for others’ ease in finding it. I hope you’ll agree to allow us this option when your work is complete.

Let us know if there’s anything else we can do to help.

Luci

Luci Englert McKeen  
National School Reform Faculty  
Assistant Director for Operations  
Connections/Managing Editor  
w: 812-330-2702  c: 812-325-9432

On Thu, Jan 29, 2015 at 5:47 PM, Yolanda Méndez <yolymendez@comcast.net> wrote:

Good afternoon,

I am a doctoral student at Seton Hall University writing my dissertation which is tentatively titled: "Implementing Transformational, Professional Learning Communities in an Urban Elementary School: An Autoethnographic Case Study", under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Barbara Strobert.

I would like your permission to modify and reproduce the survey instrument Professional Learning Communities Survey, on your website, which is based on the article: Building Professional Community in Schools by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis and Anthony Bryk.

In my research study, I would like to use and print the survey under the following conditions:

* I will use the survey in order to extract data for my research and will not sell or use it with any compensated or curriculum development activities
* I will include the copyright statement on all copies of the instrument.
* I will send my research study and one copy of reports, articles, and the like that make use of those survey data promptly to attention