

HOW CAN A CAREER ACADEMY MOVE THEIR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
PARTICIPATION FROM COMPLIANCE TO SELF-MOTIVATED COMMITMENT?

by

IVES ALCIDE-CINEAS

(Under the Direction of Walker A. Swain)

ABSTRACT

The research addressed teachers lack of motivation toward participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLC) without a mandate at a Career Academy. The purpose of the study was to examine what practices leaders can put in place that would create a collaborative adult learning environment that would lead to more teacher buy-in in PLCs. The following themes emerged from the study: (1) Structural change is needed; (2) Teacher input is important; (3) PLCs need time constraints and time to learn; (4) Teacher autonomy is key; (5) PLCs should be beneficial, and (6) Leaders should have minimal input in the PLC process. The findings were clear on what teachers needed to increase their motivation toward PLCs. It also revealed that leaders' role in PLCs should be minimal.

INDEX WORDS: career academy, climate, culture, learning team, professional learning, teacher engagement/Buy-in

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IVES ALCIDE-CINEAS

B.S., City College of New York, 1998  
M. A., University of the Southwest, 2013  
Ed. S., University of West Georgia, 2016

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IVES ALCIDE-CINEAS

Major Professor:	Walker A. Swain
Committee:	Jami Royal Berry
	Jamon Flowers

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2023

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my family. To my husband Bertrand, you have been my biggest supporter. It's because of your encouragement that I took on this journey. Thank you for all your love and support. I love you forever. To my two beautiful young ladies, Gabby and Lilly. Thank you for being patient while I pursued this dream. Your patience and understanding through this process have been invaluable. I did this for me, but I also did it for you. I hope watching me achieve this goal is an example to both of you that you can also accomplish anything with hard work and dedication. Don't let anybody put limitations on what you can achieve. Don't doubt your abilities, and don't listen to negativity... just go for it! I love you both so much.

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To my family and friends, thank you for the encouraging words, for understanding why I wasn't as present during this process, and for supporting me when I said I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree.

I did it! The Haitian girl from Brooklyn, NY, did it!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Improving teacher capacity is a crucial component of increasing student learning, and doing it through professional development is one format schools have used more frequently (Lee, 2020). In recent years, there has been a shift from in-service training and the use of outside companies to job-embedded professional development that impacts all those who support student learning (Zepeda, 2012, p.4). Guskey (2002) described professional development as systematic efforts to change teachers' classroom practices, attitudes, and beliefs. Moreover, by supporting changes in practices, beliefs, and attitudes, Guskey (2002) believed that through such efforts, the learning outcomes of students could be improved (Guskey, 2002). Professional development can be delivered in different formats, but the primary goal for all is to improve student learning (Spencer, 2016).

One of the forms of professional development is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are opportunities for teachers to improve their practice in a collaborative format (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Dufour and Eaker defined PLCs as a place " where educators work collaboratively to enhance student learning by researching answers to questions that profoundly affect the educator's work in the classroom" (Visone, 2016, p. 66). During professional learning community meetings, teachers work to improve instructional strategies that positively impact student outcomes. It also allows the organization to work on collective efficacy (Zepeda, 2012, p. 10).

Although PLCs are essential to improving student learning, teachers have not felt that professional learning communities have been beneficial (Spencer, 2016). As a result, teachers have not participated in PLCs with fidelity. Leaders must create PLCs that allow new and

veteran teachers to improve their instructional skills. A PLC should be an environment where teachers feel supported, trust their expertise is appreciated, and their efforts will enhance student learning (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). The leaders' responsibility is to prioritize the students' needs while simultaneously creating an environment where teachers are prepared to learn whatever is needed to increase student achievement (Sanzo et al., 2011).

The learning environment created by school leaders determines the outcome for students and teachers (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). Improving the learning environment for teachers and students should be done systemically, and a relationship of trust is needed to foster an effective professional learning community (Loughland & Ryan, 2020). Leaders must create a positive culture and climate for teacher learning as it directly impacts the efficacy of PLCs (Carpenter, 2015).

This study investigated leadership practices that could lead to a learning environment that teachers felt was beneficial and motivated them to willingly participate in PLCs. The study occurred at a high school Career Academy located east of Atlanta. Career academies on the high school level were designed to prepare students for post-secondary education and careers. The school's responsibility was to ensure that students were adequately prepared and employable after graduating high school (Hackmann & Malin, 2017). Increasing teacher capacity to ensure students receive proper instruction was an important focus for the administrative staff at the Career Academy, and they placed great emphasis on improving PLCs.

Professional development at the secondary level did not include enough professional learning that teachers felt pertained to them and their students (Spencer, 2016). Based on the results from a needs assessment survey regarding PLCs, the teachers at the Career Academy expressed that they did not believe PLCs were useful. The Career Academy's non-conventional

schedule and staff makeup made it challenging to create PLCs that worked for CTAE (Career, Technical, Agriculture, and Engineering) and academic teachers. The CTAE teachers with no traditional education background and the academic teachers with traditional educational backgrounds all felt PLCs did not meet their needs. This study aimed to learn why teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial and what leadership practices could be implemented to improve teachers' motivation toward PLCs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### *Local Context of the Study*

In 2019, the district required all schools to meet for weekly professional learning community (PLC) meetings. During the meetings, teachers collaborated to review student data, discuss instructional strategies, and develop plans to improve student achievement. The problem at the Career Academy was that teachers attended the weekly meetings because they were mandated to participate. They felt PLCs were not beneficial to their practice, they did not improve student learning, and PLCs infringed on the time they needed to complete their daily teacher responsibilities. The motivation to take an active role in PLCs was lacking.

Adding to the challenge of improving the PLC experience for teachers was the unique makeup of the school. The school employed academic teachers with traditional educator training and experience, along with career tech teachers with no educational background or formal training. All career tech teachers were hired directly from their field of expertise, and they had no previous high school teaching experience. The school structure made it challenging to create PLCs that could create a true community among teachers.

Another unique aspect of the school's instructional makeup was that many teachers were the only teachers who taught a particular Career, Technical, Agriculture, and Engineering

(CTAE) or academic class. Those teachers at the Career Academy were what the school called singletons. Multiple teachers taught the same subject for academic courses but did not teach the same course within the subject area. For example, there were five Social Studies teachers, but each taught a different course. Only two teachers taught the same United States History course. As a result, teachers were grouped in PLCs based on the general subject or perceived needs and educational experiences. Still, most teachers had no collaborative team familiar with their particular curriculum.

In the summer of 2021 and 2022, a needs assessment survey regarding PLCs was given to the teachers at the Career Academy to solicit information about teacher needs and suggestions on professional learning development for the upcoming school years. The surveys were completed by academic, career-tech, and special education teachers. The results revealed a significant disconnect between what the school leaders thought teachers needed in a professional development curriculum for the upcoming school years and what skills teachers felt they needed to improve on to increase their instructional skills.

One major issue from the survey was teachers felt alone in educating students and tended to tackle their obstacles independently. Although teachers met to work in a collaborative setting, the structure of the staff still left many teachers feeling isolated because they were the only teacher who taught their particular course. Teaching without support can be a detriment to teachers' practice and student achievement (Carpenter, 2017). Teaching in isolation can adversely impact student learning, leading to teachers having a negative experience in education (Tam, 2015).

Based on the survey, teachers had difficulty attending PLCs at the Career Academy for a few reasons, namely:

- Teachers were the only ones who taught a particular class, making it difficult to find other teachers to collaborate with.
- Teachers felt that meetings for professional learning communities took time away from their other responsibilities.
- The biggest hurdle was teachers felt that PLCs were a mandate that did not meet their individual needs. They attended the meeting to be compliant, but many felt they had no real input on the process.

Professional learning communities at the Career Academy were an element that the building leaders wanted to address to improve teacher capacity. They understood that building teacher capacity was essential to increasing student achievement (Zepeda, 2019). The leadership team recognized the need to create a culture of learning, increase opportunities for teachers to participate in their learning, and create professional development that teachers felt was meeting their needs. They also understood that student learning improves when teachers challenge their beliefs, learn from their colleagues, and work on their instructional skills (Tam, 2015). Making the information teachers received more tailored to their needs while also incorporating the flexibility of the delivery was an issue the school wanted to address.

### *Larger Context of the Study*

The study at the Career Academy had local implications, but it also played a role in assisting other career academies. The concept of vocational high schools that promote college and career readiness has grown in popularity in the last decade (Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2018). Examining leadership practices that increase teacher engagement at this Career Academy will be helpful to career academies as a whole. The data collected in this study can be used in current and future career academies as they work to build sustainable PLCs.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

The study provided the opportunity to examine what PLC-related leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method was the most suitable. The goal was to assess the school's approach to professional learning communities from various perspectives and determine how the leaders could facilitate positive change to improve PLC participation among teachers. While there was an abundance of research on what constituted an effective PLC, there was no research available on how to enhance PLCs in a career academy with teachers who had traditional and non-traditional educator training. Moreover, there was insufficient research on what practices increased teachers' motivation to participate in PLCs and how those practices benefited a Career Academy.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?

3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

The following section defines terms used in the school district and the Career Academy.

These terms will be used in the research and are related to this action research study.

### **Definition of Terms**

Professional Learning- DuFour et al. (2008) defined a professional learning community as educators committed to working collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (Carpenter, 2014, p. 683).

Culture- The knowledge, beliefs, values, traditions, rituals, symbols, and language of a group (Tabak & Sahin, 2020).

Climate- Experiences, and feelings that students, teachers, and staff have about the school (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006)

Career Academy- Schools whose primary purpose is to provide Career Technical Agriculture Education (CTAE) pathways. In this study, the district had one Career Academy accommodating students from three high schools.

Learning Teams- This term is used for the different teachers grouped for collaboration. Teachers meet weekly to assist each other with lesson planning, writing assessments, and support.

Learning teams are also known as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Teacher engagement/Buy-in – Teacher engagement/buy-in for this study is defined by what Guskey describes as concepts that lead to teachers being engaged. He states that for teachers to be engaged in professional learning, it must be specific, concrete, and have practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms (Guskey, 2002).

## Theoretical Framework

The study focused on how changes to the professional learning communities in schools could increase teachers' willingness to participate in PLCs. Professional learning communities are a form of professional development (Zepeda et al., 2014). According to Zepeda (2019), "PLC is a school-wide professional development effort that involves the collective capacity of all people in the organization" (p. 91). PLCs involve both adult learning and the need for teacher change. The theoretical framework used in this study was components from Knowles's Adult Learning Theory and Guskey's Model of Teacher Change.

In 1978 Knowles researched the practice of adult learning. In his research, he learned that many adult learner programs, including those for teachers, had the same approach to learning as they did for children. As adults learn, their life experiences, beliefs, and habits influence what and how they learn (Knowles, 1978). The concept of adult learning was defined by the term andragogy, which differs from pedagogy (Zepeda, 2019, p. 38). Pedagogy refers to the instruction of children, but andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn (Zepeda, 2019, p. 38). According to Zepeda (2019), professional development is a form of adult learning that supports administrator, teacher, and student learning. Professional development is a form of adult learning; therefore, portions of adult learning theory and its principles served as the framework for this study. Knowles (1978) explained five concepts of adult learning as:

- (1) Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities.
- (2) Adults' orientation to learning is life centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
- (3) Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core

methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience. (4) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in the process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it. (5) Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Knowles, 1978, p.12).

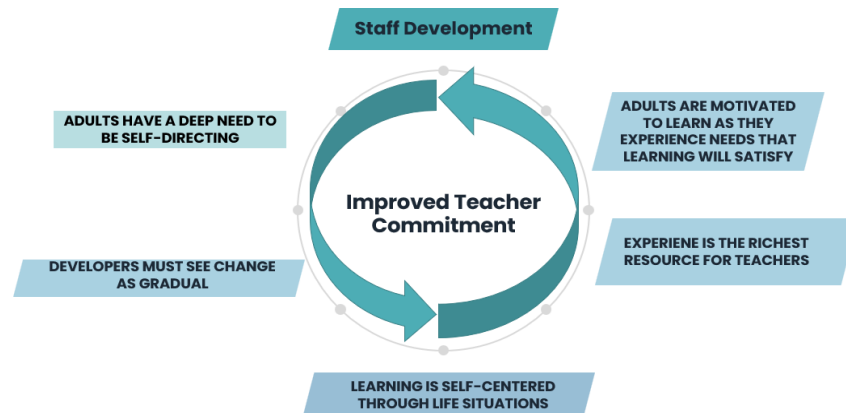
According to Guskey, professional development will not change teachers' beliefs and practices unless teachers can see proof that their strategies improve their students' learning (Guskey, 1989). He created the model for teacher change for professional development to simplify the professional development process and increase teacher perceptions and beliefs that lead to student learning. Guskey stated, "the premise of this model is that change is a learning process for teachers that is developmental and experientially based (Guskey, 1989, p. 445). Guskey's (1989) model includes three guidelines.

The model begins with staff development, leading to changes in teachers' classroom practices, student learning outcomes, and teachers' attitudes and perceptions (Guskey, 1989). There are three guiding principles of this framework:

- (1) developers must see change as a gradual and, in most cases, a difficult process for teachers.
- (2) Any change that holds promise for increasing teachers' competence and enhancing student learning is likely to require extra energy and time, especially at the outset.
- (3) These requirements can significantly add to a teacher's workload, even when release time is provided (Guskey, 1989, p.9-13).

The theoretical framework used in this study was a portion of the adult learning theory and the teacher change model. The diagram in Figure 1.1 describes the theoretical foundation of this study.

**Figure 1.1** *Theoretical Framework*



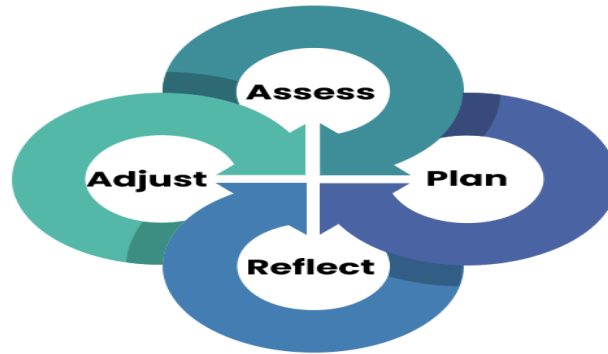
*Note.* Adapted from Knowles's (1978) and Guskey's (1989) works.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The district where this study occurred had a detailed instructional framework called The Cycle for Results, which largely mirrors a traditional action research structure of blending planning, action, data collection, and reflection in a cyclical process (Glanz, 2014). This study used a modified version of that framework as the conceptual framework. The framework is posted throughout schools; as part of the introduction to all training, and teachers are asked to tie their teaching process to the cycle. The action steps within the district's framework were used in this study, showing the cyclical nature of research. This logic model is shown in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.2**

*Conceptual Framework*



### **Overview of the Methodology**

The action research approach allowed the researcher and the practitioners to put the research into practice as the research is conducted (Mertler, 2016). The study aimed to improve teachers' commitment to taking a self-initiated approach to professional learning communities. Teachers have met regularly to discuss strategies and best practices for instruction. However, teachers frequently participated because they were required to do so. The action research allowed the teachers, instructional coach, and administration to work on the steps needed to increase teachers' willingness to participate in PLCs while implementing adjustments into practice.

Action research allowed leaders and teachers to work together to make adjustments that shifted the culture of PLCs. When teachers take an active role in PLCs, they will learn practical strategies during their sessions they connect to, and the skills are being used during instruction to improve student learning outcomes (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006).

### **Action Research**

The action research in this study was a good marriage between collaboration, learning skills, and implementation. Mertler (2016) defined action research within the realm of PLCs as: professional learning communities comprised of educators and administrators, where

action research serves as the "umbrella" mechanism that drives a faculty and staff toward its common mission and vision, and also serves as the common thread for the foundation of collaborative teamwork and professional growth. (Mertler, 2016, p.1)

Action research allowed the teachers and the leaders to work collaboratively to change the PLC process. Working collaboratively could build the trust necessary to improve teacher morale toward PLC participation (Mamluk-Naaman, 2018).

Action research was necessary for the leaders to see the teachers' perspectives on their PLC experiences in real time. This study allowed the teachers to have their voices heard while adjustments in PLC practices could be examined. Teachers and leaders met to learn, analyze the process, put interventions in place, and make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of the teachers (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

The action research design team (ARDT) and the action research implementation team (ARIT), initially worked together to determine the number of cycles needed to collect sufficient data. The action research started with baseline data derived from a needs assessment survey. The data from the survey was used to design the cycles, the interventions, and the selection of the participants. The Career Academy had academic teachers who had formal educator training and CTAE teachers who did not. Representatives from both sets of teachers participated in the action research, and two teachers from each group were part of the Action Research Implementation Team members. Surveys were used to collect data during the two cycles, and a focus group was used at the end of the two cycles. The ARDT team met monthly to review the data and to discuss adjustments that needed to be made.

## **Interventions**

The interventions in this study were considered based on baseline data from the needs assessment survey, results from subsequent surveys, and observations. In previous years, PLCs at the Career Academy were scheduled in the afternoon, and teachers' attendance was lacking for various reasons. Some teachers had after-school tutoring, needed to pick up their children from school, or didn't feel motivated to attend after a long day of teaching. The team wanted to address this issue during this study. The action research team agreed that changing the PLC time from the end of the day to the morning during the common planning period would be one of the first interventions.

The intervention for cycle two addressed the teachers' need for more control over their learning. Teachers felt that they knew their needs and those of their students best. The district leaders created the agendas for all PLCs in the district. This practice dictated what teachers would discuss during their PLC meetings. The second intervention allowed PLC leaders to create the agenda for their PLC group. This intervention allowed teachers to plan and facilitate PLCs on their own.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this research was done in a few ways. All data collected was qualitative.

1. Needs assessment survey was used as baseline data.
2. Surveys were distributed throughout the study.
3. A focus group with participants was conducted.
4. Observations of PLC meetings were done.

## **Significance of the Study**

Schools and districts regularly try to find ways to improve student learning. One of the ways to increase student achievement, restructure schools, and make transformative change is through Professional Development (Guskey, 1994). In the last few years, there has been a consensus that one form of professional development that is effective is professional learning communities because it seems to be an excellent conduit for improving teacher practices and student learning (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). The Career Academy, like many schools in its east Atlanta area, implemented a professional learning curriculum that included professional learning communities.

In 2019 the Career Academy implemented its new professional development plan, which included professional learning communities. The Career Academy was a combination of teachers with a traditional educational background and teachers who were industry professionals who were there to teach students career tech skills, but they had no formal educator training. Conducting this study at the Career Academy was vital because the Career Academy had a non-traditional high school format, and there seemed to be little to no research that I could find that addressed how to create an engaging professional learning community in a non-conventional school.

Examining what leadership practices could lead to increasing teacher motivation to participate in PLCs with or without a mandate was significant to this particular Career Academy, but the results of this study can also assist other career academies that want to develop or improve their professional learning community. Guskey states that for teachers to be engaged in professional learning, it must be specific, concrete, and there must be practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms (Guskey, 2002). This study builds on that

with an explicit focus on a secondary-level career academy.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The research is organized to give you a complete understanding of the study at the Career Academy. Chapter 1 will provide you with an introduction to the study, the problem of the study, its significance, the background of the Career Academy, the context of the study, and the research questions that will be answered in the study. Chapter 1 also explains the frameworks that were the foundation of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on effective professional development, professional learning communities, professional learning in the career tech setting, leaders' role in developing professional learning communities, and the importance of climate and culture in professional learning communities.

Chapter 3 explains the qualitative methodology of the research, which describes how the study was conducted. Chapter 4 discusses the work done by the researcher and Action Research Design Team, the interventions implemented, and the findings from the case study. Chapter 5 narrates the thematic approach to data analysis, the emerging themes from the two cycles, and their connection to the research questions. Chapter 6 summarizes the case study, the implications for school leaders and future researchers, and an overview of the findings for the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

Teachers in the vocational school setting have a combination of skills to work on. They are responsible for keeping their industry skills up to date while also working on their skills as teachers (Zhou et al., 2022). Although the academic teachers at the Career Academy had educator training, some of their colleagues did not. One of the main components of professional learning communities is the collaboration piece, and the teachers at the Career Academy struggled because of the non-conventional structure of the school (DuFour, 2014). This literature review explored what comprised effective professional development and, more specifically, professional learning communities. The researcher examined seminal studies on Professional Learning and the different components of PLCs. The literature review results detailed the teachers' and building leaders' roles in creating and sustaining a productive professional learning community that could lead to more teacher buy-in.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

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### **Research Questions**

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2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

To address the research questions, the researcher examined the literature surrounding professional development and, more specifically, professional learning communities. A review of the literature and previous studies were needed to create the foundation for this study. It was crucial to explore previous research and literature on PLCs to help guide the action research team in the study at the Career Academy.

The literature review explored the past and current trends of professional development, job-embedded learning, and the need and benefits of collaboration, including both teacher and

leaders' roles in PLCs. Literature on the culture and climate by which PLCs can thrive was also reviewed.

## **Professional Development**

Student learning has always been the most crucial component of all school systems (DuFour, 2014). In the last few decades, improving teacher skills through professional development at the school and system levels became one of the most common strategies districts used to enhance student learning (Guskey, 1994). Professional development evolved, and the literature points to the need to improve teacher capacity through job-embedded learning (Zepeda, 2019). Professional learning moved from in-service training and outside companies facilitating professional development because they were ineffective (Huijboom et al., 2021). The idea behind the use of professional development was students' lack of progress which had a direct correlation to teachers being unable to teach the curriculum properly (Fletcher et al., 2022).

Guskey defined professional development as "processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students" (Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022). Professional development should address improving teacher skills to positively impact student learning. The need to improve teacher skills places greater emphasis on building teacher capacity (Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022). It was evident in the literature that effective professional learning should vary based on teachers' needs, environment, and school improvement goals (Guskey, 1994).

Guskey (2021) discussed strategies for effective professional learning and stressed that needs vary for individuals and organizations. Guskey's six strategies for effective professional learning:

1. Focus on evidence-based practices.

2. Provide guidance in balancing adaptation.
3. Offer feedback to confirm the change makes a difference for students.
4. Ensure the feedback is based on evidence that teachers trust.
5. Plan to gather the evidence on the effects quickly.
6. Provide ongoing support with pressure (Guskey, 2021, Pg. 56-58).

A slightly different perspective of an effective PLC comes from Desimone (2011). who created five guidelines that her research showed could lead to effective professional development. Desimone's five guidelines are:

- **Content focus:** Professional development activities should focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content.
- **Active learning:** Teachers should have opportunities to get involved, such as observing and receiving feedback, analyzing student work, or making presentations, as opposed to passively sitting through lectures.
- **Coherence:** What teachers learn in any professional development activity should be consistent with other professional development, with their knowledge and beliefs, and with school, district, and state reforms and policies.
- **Duration:** Professional development activities should be spread over a semester and should include 20 hours or more of contact time.
- **Collective participation:** Groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school should participate in professional development activities together to build an interactive learning community.

Birman and her colleagues (2000) found that professional development takes the approach suggested in these five guidelines are more effective than previous guidelines, which

lacked autonomy. Their study showed that teachers must have the time to understand their needs, learn new strategies, and be given the time to apply what they have learned (Birman et al, 2000). In his extensive research on professional development, Dufour (2014) stated that professional development should be "ongoing, collective, job-embedded, results-oriented, and most effective in schools and districts that function as professional learning communities" (p. 31).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Professional learning communities are one form of professional development that supports needed ongoing adult learning and have been shown to be effective in increasing teacher capacity (DuFour, 2014). Schmoker defined the concept of professional learning communities as "a team of teachers who meet regularly to pinpoint essential student learning objectives, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, and share evidence-based strategies, and then create classes to improve upon achievement levels" (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006, p.8).

Although PLCs have become more prevalent in recent years, the concept is not new. Research shows the idea of PLCs came from the corporate sector and was later adopted in education (Igor, 2022). Research by Igor (2022) found that the concept of social and organizational context in organizations started as early as 1947 in Max Weber's System Theory. The idea evolved into the PLCs in education as early as the 1960s. PLCs increased in popularity when districts across the United States needed to create professional development, teacher evaluation systems, and teacher collaboration forums to apply for funds from the Race to the Top grants (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). The Race to the Top was a program created during the Obama administration that provided funds to districts to increase student learning outcomes by

improving the teachers' skills through collaboration, training, and evaluating teacher progress (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). PLCs fulfilled the collaborative requirement of the grant.

As schools have worked on increasing student learning through PLCs, research has been detailed on critical components that can lead to an effective PLC. Guskey (2014) stated that "the effectiveness of any professional learning community, regardless of its content, structure, or format, depends mainly on how well it is planned" (p.12). The following are critical components of effective PLCs that have emerged from the literature.

1. Provide a clear structure and purpose for PLC meetings
2. Address the most pressing instructional challenges
3. Provide support from all levels of the school system.
4. Foster an atmosphere of trust.
5. Monitor the work of PLCs and provide constructive feedback.
6. Support teachers' sense of efficacy and level of professionalism (Segura Pirtle, S., & Tobia, E., 2014).

Many of these six steps were consistently found throughout the research on PLCs. As his research evolved, Guskey (2021) also developed effective strategies for PLCs. His strategies are:

1. Focus on evidence-based practices, provide guidance in balancing adaptations.
2. Offer feedback to confirm the change makes a difference for students.
3. Ensure the feedback is based on evidence teachers trust.
4. Plan to gather evidence on effects quickly.
5. Provide ongoing support with pressure (Guskey, 2021, p.56-58).

Some of the obstacles of PLC are the difficulty of implementing change and customizing the needs of students and teachers (Guskey, 1994). Teachers must believe that the change they

are working toward is possible and will benefit their students for them to participate with fidelity (Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022). Guskey's (1989) research also discussed teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward change. Teachers will not work hard on PLCs or any initiative if they feel that it will not benefit their students (Guskey, 2002). Teacher confidence and attitudes toward the effectiveness of PLCs are directly connected to student outcomes (Guskey, 2002). Guskey (2002) emphasized having clear goals, teacher support, and using evidence-based practices that teachers believe will improve student learning for an effective and sustainable PLC.

PLCs in education have become essential to increasing teacher efficacy (Lee, 2020). It encourages collaboration, where teachers assist each other with lesson plans, data analysis, reflection, and a shared goal of continuous improvement (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). When effectively done, PLCs can increase student learning across content areas while increasing teacher effectiveness (Namwong, 2021).

The literature discussed several components of PLCs that can positively impact student learning, but one of the most important was collaboration (Zepeda, 2019; Carpenter, 2017; Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Hoaglund et al., 2014). Carpenter (2017) stated that "the primary outcome of collaboration is the act or process of "shared creation" through discovery learning and involves the creation of something new by doing something different (p.1071). When teachers work together, it increases student outcomes and the effectiveness of the school's structure (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). As teachers work collaboratively, they can learn from their peers' experiences to work on practices, delivery methods, and trends to improve student learning (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006).

The shared vision of improving student learning improves teachers' self-efficacy (Lee, 2020). The increase in self-efficacy allows teachers to use the skills they are learning and

working on within their PLCs effectively in their classrooms. The ability of teachers to transmit their learning from the PLC to the classroom is essential to increasing student achievement. Similar to instruction for students, PLCs are most effective when strategies and protocols are customized to meet the needs of the teachers (Guskey, 2021).

Customizing adult learning in PLCs was a critical strategy for improving teacher buy-in. The adult learning theory by Knowles (1978) positioned that:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; these are, therefore, the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities.
2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.
3. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.
5. Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (p.12).

Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) highlighted seven traits of effective teacher training.

They emphasized that effective teacher training programs:

- (a)Focus on content, which promotes teacher participation through (b)active learning, and (c)collaboration for sharing ideas and learning. Programs characterized by (d)the use of models of effective practices, (e)coaching and

support from an expert, and those that leave (f)time for feedback and reflection are, in turn, associated with improved student performance. Finally, they highlighted the success of training programs with a (g)sustained duration that allows teachers to learn, put into practice, and reflect on their new knowledge and skills (Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022).

PLCs are a time for teachers to work collaboratively and work on improving student learning. Haack and Marshall (2021) stated that to work on student achievement, members of a PLC must answer four critical questions: What do we want students to know? How will we know if they know it? What will we do if they already know it? And what will we do if they don't know it?

### **The Role of Leadership in Professional Learning Communities**

Leaders play one of the most critical roles in creating a structured PLC, creating an environment of learning for teachers and students, facilitating data analysis, and creating the vision for the PLCs and the school (Carpenter, 2015). Danche and colleagues (2022) stated that "the main responsibility of school leaders should be the improvement of teaching and student learning" (p. 47). A large number of the literature discussed the best practices of school leaders in PLCs, but there was not a large number of research on how leaders can build teacher motivation toward professional learning in a career academy.

An effective PLC requires an environment where teachers feel encouraged and supported. The leaders' approach to professional learning communities significantly influences the program's success (Postholm, 2019). An overwhelming amount of research on professional learning and, more specifically, professional learning communities discussed the need for

teachers to have an environment where they trust their expertise will be valued, and it would lead to improved student learning (Calvert, 2016).

Similar to past research, the teachers at the Career Academy felt their views and needs were not being recognized by school and district leaders. Based on the literature, creating a culture and climate for teacher learning is vital. Knowles (1978) stated that "adult learners are precisely those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized situations of learning" (Knowles 1978, p. 11). The environment where teachers learn and collaborate must be a trusting environment, flexible, and respectful of their expertise (Carpenter, 2017). The principals and other school leaders are responsible for creating such an environment (Carpenter, 2017).

The foundation of PLCs is teachers' ability to be a community, and to exchange instructional strategies and data that will lead to improved student learning (DuFour, 2014). School leaders and principals must understand their role and the link to student achievement (Spanneut, 2010). The literature was clear on the need for leaders to build relationships with their teachers to both know them personally and learn their skill set as teachers. Teachers tend to work harder, take an active role in PLCs, and are committed to student improvement when working in a building where mutual respect among teachers and leadership is present (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). The school leader must involve their teachers in PLCs as instructional partners (Ezzani, 2020).

A study conducted in Turkey showed the correlation between leadership practices and teacher motivation toward "organizational citizenship and work participation" (Okçu & Admiş, 2022). The study discussed the connection between teacher professionalism and leaders' behavior. In the study, professionalism was defined in either three or four domains. The three-

domain format for professionalism was (1) knowledge and skill that the teacher has towards the profession, (2) the teacher's responsibility and power toward students, (3) teachers' autonomous action areas in fulfilling the requirements of the profession (Okçu & Admiş, 2022). The four-domain format that explained professionalism by Hoy and Miskel in 2010 was (1) specialization, (2) student-centeredness, (3) autonomy, and (4) self-control (Okçu & Admiş, 2022). The study found organizations' members have various needs, and it's the responsibility of the leaders to not only recognize those needs but also to use those needs to empower teachers (Okçu & Admiş, 2022)

### **Professional Learning Communities and Career Academies**

The model to combine business partnerships, career readiness, and high school instruction is the central concept of career academies (Fletcher et al., 2022). Career academies play a role in student engagement by minimizing high school drop-out rates, exposing students to post-secondary career options, and assisting students with transitioning from high school to college or the workforce (Hemelt et al., 2019). In 2021, it was estimated that approximately one million students were enrolled in a Career Academy (Fletcher et al., 2022).

Systems that include career academies within their district tackle two community concerns.

Career academies assist students with exposure to post-secondary careers through CTAE (Career, Technical, Agriculture, and Engineering) courses taught by industry professionals. It also helps the workforce by increasing the number of people with employability skills (Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2018). One of the things taught in career academies is soft skills (Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2018). According to Hernandez-Gantes (2018), soft skills are defined in many ways, but the consensus seems they involve three elements: interpersonal skills, social skills, and work ethic

(Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2018). Similar to the Career Academy in this study, incorporating CTAE courses is done within the daily high school setting (Hemelt et al., 2019).

There was minimal literature on career academies, and at the time of the study, I could not find literature that discussed PLCs within the Career Academy setting. Because of this gap in the research, it was essential to explore PLCs within this particular career academy.

A few teachers at the Career Academy were the only ones who taught a particular curriculum. Aaron Hansen (2015) explored this concept of "singletons." Singletons within the school setting were the only teachers in the building who taught a specific course. Hansen stated the solutions to assist singletons in the PLC format were vertical teams, interdisciplinary teams, singletons who support virtual teams, and structural change (Hansen, 2015). He defined the terms as:

Vertical Teams- Teachers who teach the same subject but in different grade levels.

The teachers work in a PLC to ensure students learn the skills needed to succeed in each grade level (Hansen, 2015, p.7).

Interdisciplinary Teams- Teachers who teach different subjects work together in a PLC to create curriculums and assessments focusing on universal foundational skills (Hansen, 2015, p.19).

Singletons Who Support- The teacher joins PLC one of the traditional PLCs and supports and assists them in reaching their goals (Hansen, 2015, p.31)

Virtual Teams- Using technology to connect with other teachers who teach the same course they teach. This will allow them to create a PLC and collaborate with people in different locations (Hansen, 2015, p.45).

Structural Change- Schools and districts may have to consider the way they are set up. Their structure should be arranged to promote certain behaviors (Hansen, 2015).

### **Climate and Culture**

A school's culture and climate directly affect how teachers participate in PLCs (Danche et al., 2022). There is a consensus in the research regarding how vital culture and climate were to teachers' motivation toward PLCs. For leaders to see significant change, they should make sure the teachers who will execute the needed change are part of the process and planning of any initiative (Igor, 2022). PLCs need a positive school environment where ownership is vital (Ezzani, 2020).

Professional learning communities cannot thrive in an environment that is not conducive to adult learning (Tabak & Sahin, 2020). The culture and climate of the building have a direct effect on teachers' views toward professional development and, more specifically, professional learning communities (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Culture and climate can affect the school's operation. (Tabak & Sahin, 2020) defined culture as "the knowledge, beliefs, values, traditions, rituals, symbols, and language of a group, in short, the group's lifestyle" (p. 45). The climate is "the attitude or mood of the school" (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Wang and Degol (2016) defined school climate in four ways: academic, community, safety, and institutional environment (Heinla & Kuurme, 2022).

The school culture and climate can enhance or hinder the formation and motivation towards professional learning communities (Zhang et al., 2022). Teachers working in an environment where they feel supported is critical to their motivation to collaborate and improve student learning (Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022). As PLCs are one of the essential components

to increasing student achievement, school leaders must create a learning environment that builds trust, motivation, and teachers' readiness toward change (Tabak & Sahin, 2020).

### **Chapter Summary**

To improve and maintain quality instruction and student achievement, teachers must indulge in adult learning and adapt to new trends (Zhang et al., 2022). The literature revealed that developing a Professional Learning Community within schools has become one of the most effective professional development tools for improving student learning (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Within adult learning, the professional learning community is an essential factor within the school setting (Igor, 2022). DuFour and Eaker (1998) described PLCs as “an opportunity for teachers to build on collective efficacy by indulging in reflective inquiry that can improve student learning” (Markku Antinluoma et al., 2021, p.2).

The research detailed what past studies constitute effective PLCs, but researchers also stated that each setting should differ based on school and need. Climate, culture, and school leaders play one of the most vital roles in developing and sustaining engaging professional learning communities (Haack & Marshall, 2021). Trust, mutual respect, and proof that participation in PLCs can lead to student achievement are all critical motivating factors for teachers' involvement in PLCs. The effectiveness of professional development increases when it combines theory, practical application, feedback, and cognitive peer coaching with follow-up (Zepeda et al., 2014)

The research lacked studies on professional learning communities within a secondary career academy. The study aimed to fill an apparent gap in the research by investigating what practices would motivate teachers to engage in PLCs in a career academy.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The collaborative nature of professional learning communities was essential to building teacher capacity (DuFour, 2014). The secondary-level career academy used the professional learning community format to increase teacher collaboration and practice. It was critical for the leaders at the career academy to create an adult learning environment that could lead to improving teachers' willingness to be active participants in PLCs.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

The study provided the opportunity to examine what PLC-related leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method was the most suitable. The goal was to assess the school's approach to professional learning communities from various perspectives and determine how the leaders could facilitate positive change to improve PLC participation among teachers. While there was an abundance of research on what constituted an effective PLC, there was no research available on how to enhance PLCs in a career academy with teachers who had traditional and non-traditional educator training. Moreover, there was insufficient research on what practices increased teachers' motivation to participate in PLCs and how those practices

benefited a Career Academy.

## Research Questions

The following questions will guide the framework for the research:

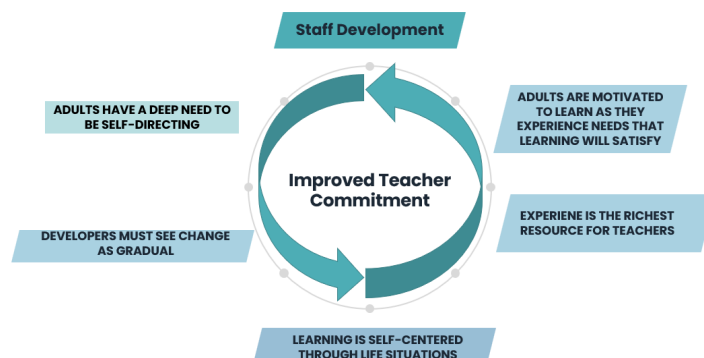
1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

## Research Design and Methodology

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework combined Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and Guskey's Teacher Change Theory. This framework was the foundation of the study, and it helped create the structure of the research. PLCs are a form of adult learning that requires adjustments and change to be embedded in the curriculum based on the needs of the teachers and the students. Figure 3.1 presents the theoretical framework.

**Figure 3.1** *Theoretical Framework*



Teachers' unwillingness to actively participate in professional learning has been an issue in many schools. Most teachers attended because they were mandated to do so but did not feel it improved their practice or student achievement (Calvert, 2016). However, Professional learning and professional learning communities were essential tools that districts used to enhance teachers' practice, which could increase student learning (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). It was critical for the schools to create an environment that promoted teachers' motivation toward attending and actively participating in PLCs without a mandate from school leaders.

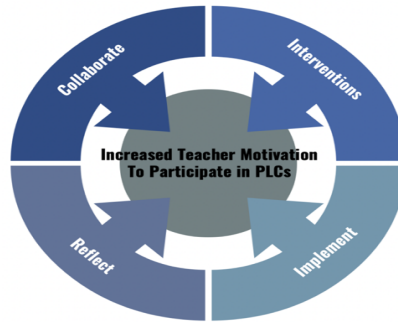
### **Logic Model**

The components for the logic model used in this study were based on Riel's (2019) collaborative approach to action research. The collaborative approach to action research is an iterative framework that includes a personal, organizational, and scholarly level. This study aimed to improve teacher participation in professional learning, change the culture toward teacher learning, and increase the relationship between leaders and staff. For this goal to be achieved and to create foundational change in professional learning, best practice shows that it should be done collaboratively (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Riel's collaborative approach to action research suggests that the approach is "done WITH people in a social context and understanding the change means probing multiple understanding of complex social systems" (Riel, 2019, p.1).

Figure 3.2 presents the logic model that guided this action research study.

**Figure 3.2**

*Logic Model*



### **Action Research Design**

The research was done in a qualitative action research format. Action research allows the researcher and the practitioners to put the research into practice as the research is being conducted (Mertler, 2016). The purpose of this research was to explore practices that could lead to an increase in teachers' commitment to participate in professional learning without being mandated to do so. Action research was the best format for this study because it allowed the teachers to continue learning and collaborate while the study was conducted (Lynn et al., 2010). Mertler (2016) stated that action research and PLCs have many of the same foundations, and combining the two can lead to concepts that work well together. By combining the two concepts, Mertler (2016) created the term Action Research Learning Communities. Mertler (2016) stated that the combination of the two concepts offers an opportunity for (1) a common and collective focus and vision, (2) sustained collaborative inquiry, (3) individualized, customizable, and meaningful professional growth, and (4) true empowerment through collaborative, inquiry-based, and reflective practice. The Action research format allows research in the school setting where real change can be beneficial (Mertler, 2016, p.3).

In preparation for the study, the researcher approached several CTAE and academic teachers to create the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

*Action Research Design Team*

The action research design team (ARDT) was comprised of school personnel from different facets of the PLC process. The ARDT included an administrator, a CTAE teacher leader, an academic teacher leader, the instructional coach, and one special education teacher. Because the Career Academy had a non-conventional format, it was essential to have teachers with CTAE and traditional academic backgrounds represented. The Action Research Design Team included some of the Action Research Implementation Team members. Still, the researcher preferred to work with a smaller group to meet and discuss interventions, data, and needed adjustments throughout the study. The members of the ARDT are presented in Table 3.1.

The Action Research Design Team assisted with deciding the interventions, and they assisted with the questions for the surveys and the focus group meeting. ARDT members were a great source of information because they consistently interacted with participants and other staff members, and it allowed the researcher to get up to date information and feedback that could be used in the research. Their interaction with their colleagues also helped structure the research. ARDT members identity was protected by the use of pseudonyms.

**Table 3.1**

*Action Research Design Team Members (Pseudonyms used)*

<b>Team Member</b>	<b>Primary role at the Career Academy</b>	<b>Role in Action Research</b>
Primary Researcher	Lead Teacher for Compliance for Special Education, Assistant to Administrators	Led and facilitated research along with the design and implementation team.

Anne Randle	Assistant Principal	Administrator. In charge of all professional learning conducted at the academy, and she provided expert knowledge in professional learning and how the information is transferred to classroom instruction.
Shawn Banks	Instructional Coach	She provided expert knowledge on teachers' instructional needs and the transfer of knowledge from PLCs to the classroom. She offered expert knowledge in coaching and teachers' needs.
Randolph Ford	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over ten years of experience. Participated in multiple PLCs.
Alicia Knight	CTAE Instructor	Career instructor with no formal training in education.
Sarah Jefferson	Academic Instructor	Social Studies teacher with formal education training and over 15 years of experience.

*Action Research Implementation Team Members*

The ARIT consisted of seven staff members representing different perspectives of the school. The team included an administrator who supervised both CTAE and academic teachers, two special education teachers who assisted students and worked with teachers in both CTAE and academic classes, an academic teacher with over fifteen years of experience, the instructional coach, and a CTAE teacher with over five years of experience. The ARIT met three times to discuss the structure of the study, and they were vital in helping the researcher lay out

the format and timeline for the study. ARIT members identity was protected by the use of pseudonyms.

Table 3.2 presents the ARIT members.

**Table 3.2**

*Action Research Implementation Team Members (Pseudonyms used)*

<b>Team Member</b>	<b>Primary role at the Career Academy</b>	<b>Role in Action Research</b>
Primary Researcher	Lead Teacher for Compliance for Special Education, Assistant to Administrators	Leads and facilitates research along with the design and implementation team.
Anne Randle	Assistant Principal	Administrator. In charge of all professional learning conducted at the academy. Provides expert knowledge in professional learning and how the information is transferred to classroom instruction.
Shawn Banks	Instructional Coach	Provides expert knowledge on teachers' instructional needs and the transfer of knowledge from PLCs to the classroom. It also offers expert knowledge in coaching and teachers' needs.
Randolph Ford	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over ten years of experience. Participates in multiple PLCs.
Angela Reed	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over four years of experience. Participates in multiple PLCs.
Alicia Knight	CTAE Instructor	Career instructor with no formal training in education.

Sarah Jefferson

Academic Instructor

Social Studies teacher with formal education training and over 15 years of experience.

Planning for the study began in May 2022 and ended in January 2023. Table 3.3 presents the timeline for this action research.

**Table 3.3**

*Action Research Timeline*

May 2022	Meeting with potential team members
July 2022	New school year. Action research team members meet to plan research activities.
August 2022	Monthly meeting and action research cycle 1. Activities include surveys and observations.
September 2022	Monthly meeting.
October 2022	Monthly meeting. Action research cycle. Discuss first intervention
November 2022	Monthly meeting. Cycle 1 interventions. The first survey was distributed to participants at the end of cycle 1.
January 2022	Monthly meeting. Cycle 2 interventions. The Final survey was distributed to participants. Focus group conducted.

**Context of the Study**

Action research is grounded in the context of the study and the structure of the Career Academy played a central role in this study. The Career Academy was a charter program in the state of Georgia. It was located in a suburban area about 26 miles east of Atlanta, with a population of approximately 90,896. The district had 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, and five non-traditional schools and served a little over 16,000 students. The students in the district came from diverse backgrounds. The district was comprised

of 68% African American, 15% Hispanic, 12% White, 3% multi-racial, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander.

Enrollment at the Career Academy steadily increased in the last three years. With 19 pathways/careers and several dual enrollment options to choose from, students had increasingly taken advantage of the opportunity to attend the Career Academy. In the 2018-2019 school year, the student enrollment was 1,281; in 2019-2020, the number of students registered was 1,820; and in the 2020-2021 school year, the population continued to increase with an enrollment of 2,029 students.

During the 2020-2021 school year, there were 1,383 African Americans, 192 Whites, 346 Latinos, 33 Asians, and 68 students from multiple races. The enrollment by gender was 1249 females and 780 males. Students who received special education services also attended the Career Academy, and their enrollment also increased in the last few years. In the 2018-2019 school year, 75 students with disabilities were enrolled at the Career Academy. In the following two years, the enrollment increased to 113 in 2019-20 and 131 in the 2020-2021 school year.

The Career Academy was a non-traditional school, providing academic and vocational classes for high school-level students. The combination of vocational and academic courses differed from the traditional high school format, and the staff at the school was a combination of individuals who were traditional teachers and industry professionals who were experts in the multiple pathways offered. The industry professionals come to the Career Academy with no teacher background or training.

In 2019, the Career Academy began to require teachers to meet for weekly professional learning community (PLC) meetings with an agenda created by the district-level administrative team. The different PLC groups were grouped based on their content or career tech background.

During the 2020-21 school year, a professional learning committee was formed to plan, create, and facilitate staff development. Creating PLCs that were beneficial to teachers and staff was a priority for the administrative staff, and this study played a significant role in assisting them with making positive changes to teachers' PLC experience. Based on Professional Learning needs assessment data, it was apparent that teachers did not find PLCs beneficial. Examining what leadership practices could lead teachers in a non-traditional setting, like the Career Academy, to increase their motivation toward PLCs was essential to the field of education. Previous studies discussed effective PLCs and change in teachers' attitude toward PLCs, but there was little research that addressed leadership practices that could increase teacher engagement toward PLCs in a setting with a combination of non-traditional and traditional trained teachers.

### **Data Sources**

#### *Participants*

The researcher presented the study, and explained the role and expectations of participants. The only criteria the researcher had for the participants were for them to currently be classroom teachers required to attend PLC. In seeking participants, the researcher also wanted a combination of CTAE teachers and academic teachers to participate in the study. The Career Academy had two sets of teachers. There were academic teachers who had traditional education backgrounds and training, and there were also CTAE teachers whose careers and training in education began at the Career Academy. Those teachers were industry professionals with no experience in teaching. To ensure the two sets of teachers were properly represented in the study, it was essential to have a combination of the two sets of teachers as participants. This representation was noted by separating the two sets of teachers in the research questions. The separation was also essential to the study's validity. Special education teachers were also

participants. This allowed the study to include teachers with the unique experience of supporting students and attending PLCs in both the CTAE and academic settings. Participants completed a needs assessment survey during the 2022-2023 school year. All survey data were de-identified as participants were assigned pseudonyms to pair survey results with the given participants.

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) members participated in a total of six hours of collaboration per team member. The six hours took place over five months, and participation was voluntary. Participants were recruited based on their interest in and commitment to the study. Participants completed a pre-survey needs assessment that took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Focus group time was approximately 40 minutes and included 14 participants. The focus group occurred with the Action Research Design Team present at the study's conclusion. Participation in focus groups for participants was voluntary and recruited through interoffice email.

A consent form was distributed (see Appendix F) with information including purpose, procedures, reporting, recording, and privacy. All participants received informed consent, including descriptions of expectations and the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. Although all participants received a pseudonym to protect their identities, they could stop or leave any focus group or the study at any point. The use of coding in analyzing data for focus groups aligned with the password protection of identifiable data. The eventual deletion of identifiable data will occur after five years. The Focus group interview was video/audio recorded and downloaded into a password-protected file on a laptop computer. The researcher assured that any information shared during action research team meetings by the members she supervised would not have any bearing upon their evaluations and would remain strictly confidential.

### *Selection Criteria*

By choosing purposeful sampling, the researcher sought "to describe a particular context in-depth" and to find "data that fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and constraints and challenges being faced" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 186).

Participants in the study must have met preselected criteria. These criteria included current employment as a teacher at the Career Academy who were required to attend PLC meetings. Meeting these requirements was purposeful as this study defined parameters for local school leaders' potential influence on the teachers' experience in PLCs mandated by school and district leaders.

The years of experience and educational background varied among participants. All participants freely volunteered to take part in the study. Table 3.4 outlines the participants and their backgrounds during the study.

**Table 3.4**

### ***Participants Educational Background and Years of Experience*** *(Pseudonyms used)*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Primary Role at the Career Academy</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Traditional Teacher Education</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>
Heather King	Culinary Teacher	1	No	B.A.
Kathy Lowe	Culinary Teacher	2	No	B.A.
Sandy Lang	Computer Science Teacher	4	No	M.S.
Angela Reed	Special Education Teacher	4	Yes	M. A.
Alicia Knight	Healthcare Teacher	6	No	M.S.

Randolph Ford	Special Education Teacher	11	Not initially	M. Ed
Frank Harvey	ELA Teacher	11	Yes	Ed. S.
Alvin Cook	History Teacher	12	Yes	PHD
Bobby Sanders	Audio/Video Instructor	13	Not initially	Ed.S.
Sarah Jefferson	History Teacher	17	Yes	M. Ed
Cherry Dunkley	Early Childhood Teacher	17	Not initially	M. Ed
Lydia Grant	ELA Teacher	18	Yes	M. Ed
Joanne Sands	Science Teacher	22	Yes	Ed.S.
Henry Thomas	History Teacher	22.5	Yes	B.S.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Action research is a collaborative process involving practitioners critically analyzing their work, identifying areas of needed improvement, and undergoing a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2019). For data collection, the researcher used a qualitative approach, which is a systematic process of observing, learning, understanding, and questioning (Mertler, 2019). The researcher used the following qualitative methods:

1. Observations
2. Surveys

### 3. Focus Group

#### **Observations**

One way the researcher collected data was through observations. The participants and leaders were observed during PLC meetings. The interaction among teachers was also observed during the focus group meeting. Bloomberg & Volpe (2019) defines observations as, "a central and fundamental method in qualitative inquiry and is used to discover and explain complex interactions in natural social settings (p194). The researcher observed PLCs to collect data on how the intervention impacted the PLC meetings. It allowed the researcher to understand the culture of the PLCs at the Career Academy. The observations lasted approximately 40 minutes. An observation guide, as shown in Appendix E, was used to keep observations structured and consistent. A sampling of observational data is offered in Table 3.5. The data in the table was collected through observations during Action Research Cycle 1 and Cycle 2.

**Table 3.5**

*Observation Sample for Cycles 1 and 2*

<b>Learning Teams</b>	<b>Date and Time</b>	<b>Highlights of Observations</b>
CTAE Group 1	November 9, 2022, 8:15 AM	This group had two first-year teachers with no formal education training. The Learning Team leader has eight years of CTAE teaching, and she still works in the healthcare field part-time. One of the new teachers expressed difficulty planning lessons and creating activities. The team gave her suggestions on resources to use but could not provide specific recommendations. The team openly expressed

Science PLC	11/15/22 8:30 AM	they did not want to participate in the meeting. Teachers reviewed district testing data to discuss remediation plans. One teacher was openly resistant to participating.
CTAE Group 2	1/18/23	Members got along well. They discussed fundraisers for their programs and upcoming competitions. The group discussed strategies they used and ways to improve enrollment in their program.
ELA PLC	1/24/23 8:15 AM	The team leader created this meeting's agenda. The teachers were engaged in discussing scheduling district testing and reading initiatives. Team members were uncomfortable when a district coach who wanted to discuss strategies and district initiatives joined the meeting.

## Surveys

Surveys were given to collect baseline data and to inform the study throughout the process. Surveys were easily distributed among participants to collect data with limited intrusion (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Surveys were used as an instrument used to assess the participants' views on the interventions and their PLC experience (Glanz, 2014). The Likert-style surveys allowed teachers to express their opinions about PLCs and the interventions implemented anonymously, bolstering the study's validity.

Surveys were distributed immediately following the end of each cycle, and participants were given a week to submit their responses. Surveys were kept to a maximum of four questions to ensure that the survey didn't impede on participants' other daily responsibilities.

Analysis of the survey results was reviewed by the ARDT after each cycle. The survey questions and results were discussed with the ARDT to ensure validity and trustworthiness. The researcher created the surveys using the Likert model through Microsoft Forms. Participants were given a week to complete the surveys. Reminders were sent throughout the week to maximize the number of responses. Once the window was closed, the researcher used an Excel spreadsheet created by Microsoft Forms to filter and gather the information.

### **Focus Group**

A focus group was conducted with teachers at the Career Academy once both action research cycles were completed. According to (Glanz, 2014), focus groups are "groups of individuals who are selected by a researcher and consent to share their views and opinions on specific topics related to an action research project" (p. 130). The focus group was used for the researcher to learn how the participants felt about PLCs, the interventions used, and practices that could improve their PLC experience. Focus groups allowed the participants to not only answer pre-determined questions (see Appendix D), but also allowed participants to provide the researcher with additional information that would not be available through surveys and observations alone. The focus group was a semi-structured format that lasted about 40 minutes. The researcher included time for participants to openly give feedback and suggestions on how leaders can improve their PLC experience. The focus group allowed the researcher to observe how the teachers interacted with each other within their natural environment which allowed the researcher to get a better understanding of the culture of the Career Academy.

For this study, the researcher was an observer-participant. As an observer-participant, the researcher's participation was limited, and the participants were made aware of the researcher's purpose in the meetings (Glanz, 2014). As the observer-participant, the study participants knew that the researcher may collect data on their interactions (Ganz, 2014). Though this may limit participants' willingness to be transparent, it allowed the researcher to observe them in their environment and gain a better understanding of the culture of the PLCs.

### **Interventions**

The interventions in this study were considered from baseline data from the needs assessment survey, results from subsequent surveys, and observations. Glanz (2003) defined intervention as "a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group" (p.64). Following the initial data collection, the first intervention was to change the time PLCs took place. In previous years, PLCs at the Career Academy were scheduled in the afternoon. Teachers' attendance was lacking for various reasons, such as tutoring sessions immediately following dismissal and family obligations (i.e., picking up child(ren) from daycare). The team wanted to address the lack of attendance during this study.

One of the unique aspects of the Career Academy was teachers had a common planning period. The Career Academy students were also enrolled at their zoned high schools. Students attended their first-period classes at their homeschools before being bused to the Career Academy. This structure allowed all the teachers at the Career Academy to have a common planning time – first period. The action research team agreed that the first intervention would be changing the PLC time from the end of the day to the common planning period in the morning.

The teachers also expressed their displeasure with the number of meetings they had to attend, along with their daily teaching responsibilities. The other intervention implemented during cycle one was the frequency of the PLCs. PLCs were scheduled to meet once a week. Teachers felt that attending PLCs once a week took away from their ability to plan for their classes, grade assignments, and tend to their other teacher duties. With permission from the principal, the ARDT was allowed to change the frequency from once a week to once every other week.

The intervention for cycle two addressed the teachers' need for more control over their learning. Teachers felt that they knew their needs and those of their students best. In the past, with no input from teachers, the district created agendas for all PLCs. The intervention allowed PLC leaders to develop the agenda for their bi-weekly meetings for January. The intervention allowed teachers to facilitate PLCs on their own.

The ARDT used the theoretical framework, logic model, and survey data to determine interventions for both cycles. The interventions were implemented in hopes of being able to answer the research questions and improve teachers' motivation toward PLCs. Table 3.6 presents the summary of interventions.

**Table 3.6.- Summary of Interventions**

<b>Action Research Cycles</b>	<b>Interventions</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Target Group</b>
1	Change PLCs from after-school to first block during teachers' common planning period	November 2022- PLCs twice a month	All participants

1	Change frequency of PLCs from once a week to twice of month	November 2022- Twice a month	All participants
2	Allow teacher leaders to create their own agenda	January 2023- Twice a month	All participants

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The researcher and the ARDT analyzed data from surveys, observations, and the focus group. Data analysis is a variety of structured processes that looks across your data for patterns that can be turned into themes and findings that will answer your research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Glanz, 2014). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) provided a road map for analyzing data that the research can

1. Identify big ideas
2. Re-examine data and place it in categories
3. Report findings
4. Analyze and interpret findings

The data-driven process of inductive coding was used when analyzing the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Inductive coding is a qualitative data analysis process that helps to organize the data into categories and identify patterns among the categories (Glanz, 2014). The researcher allowed the themes to emerge from the data. The questions from the surveys, the observations, and the focus group were aligned with the research questions. Table 3.7 is a sample of coding and data analysis.

**Table 3.7.** *Sample of codes and data analysis*

Code	Meaning	Data Sample
T	Time	"The only reason why I don't want to go is because I have a lot of other things on my plate that I feel like I can do, but I'm. I'm not saying that they're not helpful to me."
S	Structural Change	"I can't even be a part of it. I have nothing to do with that, but yet we're still asked to do certain things and then I know that we have to have it just for, I guess, compliance. Everybody can do it, but it makes people upset when you have to attend things when you it does not apply to you."
A	Autonomy	"if we felt like we were included in the process, then a lot of what goes on and a lot of what happens in those PLC's would have been different because now we will be talking about the things that really affect our immediate environment and that is not done so." "It's from the agenda all the way down. It is all pre-formatted and we have no say."

LT	Little input from Leaders	<p>I think so. I think I think it's helpful if I think #1 autonomy and there is room for leadership saying these awesome things we'd love for you guys to talk about. This is important. This is something that's happening. There's room for that for sure, but implementation of like I know you're not asking about it, but like our lesson plans, my lesson planning is sacred. I have a certain way that I do it, but having to fit into a prescribed somebody else's brain unless in plan, you know, it's difficult. And I think there's something similar with that with PLC's.</p>
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*Thematic Analysis*

The themes were derived from an inductive coding data-driven analysis approach. (Bloomberg, 2019, p. 233) stated that "The idea is that data leads to theory, and in pure form, an inductive approach builds on the idea that data can more or less "speak for themselves" and may offer us a "truly grounded" theory." The researcher allowed the themes to organically emerge from the data. The questions from the surveys, the observations, and the focus group were aligned with the research questions. The focus group was recorded, and the transcription was reviewed with members of the Action Research Design Team using the member-checking approach to ensure accuracy.

## Reliability and Validity

Protocols were implemented to ensure that the data collection was credible and dependable. Researchers are most concerned with trustworthiness when dealing with qualitative data, and trustworthiness was important in this study (Mertler, 2019). Mertler stated, "Trustworthiness is established by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of qualitative data" (p. 141). The researcher in this study sought trustworthiness through the triangulation of data and data analysis, as presented in Table 3.8. Triangulation occurs when researchers use multiple methods and data sources to gather information on a topic (Mertler, 2019). The primary researcher in this project compared data gained from the focus group, observations, and surveys to triangulate the data and note any piece of data that seemed to be an outlier and unsupported by other data in the study. The researcher met with the design team monthly to review the research questions and methods to ensure the research remained true to itself. Creating a study that accurately reflected the participants' views and the data was imperative to produce quality research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Table 3.8 describes the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and the timetable for data collection.

**Table 3.8**

*Steps to Ensure Reliability and Validity*

Research Question	Data Collected	Analysis Approach	Timeline
<b>1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?</b>	Qualitative Approach *Observations were conducted during CTAE PLCs. Their interaction with peers was also observed during the focus group. *Focus Groups-CTAE teachers participated	*Observation notes *Surveys results. *Thematic analysis used during the inductive coding process.	October 2022- January 2023

in the focus group and were given the opportunity to provide information from the CTAE perspective.  
 \*Journaling by researcher for self-reflection.  
 \*Surveys- Distributed to all participants.

**2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?**

Qualitative Approach  
 \*Observations were conducted during academic PLCs. Their interaction with peers was also observed during the focus group.  
 \*Focus Groups- Academic teachers participated in the focus group and were given the opportunity to provide information from the academic perspective.  
 \*Journaling by researcher for self-reflection  
 \*Surveys- Distributed to all participants.

\*Observation notes  
 \*Surveys results  
 \*Thematic analysis used during the inductive coding process.

October 2022-  
 January 2023

**3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?**

Qualitative Approach  
 \*Observations were conducted during academic PLCs. Their interaction with peers was also observed during the focus group.  
 \*Focus Groups- Academic teachers participated in the focus group and were given the opportunity

\*Observation notes  
 \*Surveys results.  
 \*Thematic analysis used during the inductive coding process.

October 2022-  
 January 2023

to provide information  
from the academic  
perspective.  
\*Journaling by  
researcher for self-  
reflection  
\*Surveys- Distributed  
to all participants.

### *Subjectivity Statement*

As the supervisor for the Special Education Department, the researcher was responsible for supervising all aspects of special education for the school in this study. The researcher was also a building leadership team member as an assistant to the administrators, which allowed her to take a leadership role in different aspects of the school.

As a member of this team, the researcher assisted with deciding which professional learning opportunities were provided to teachers. Because this study's focus was PLCs, the position as one of the planning team members gave the researcher a leadership role with the participants in the research. Although the researcher was a leader in the Career Academies professional development committee, the local and district-level administrative teams made the final decisions on the agendas and the schedule for the PLCs. The participants were aware of this fact.

As a building leader, the researcher interacted with the participants in this study consistently. The researchers' position may have given teachers the perception that the researcher was an extension of the administrative team. Still, the researcher explained her position to ensure participants felt comfortable being fully transparent. The researcher was not required to attend PLCs. However, she attended the PLCs to make informed decisions for the special education

teachers and students. The researcher was also able to give suggestions on the best approaches to support students who needed accommodations.

To mitigate the effects the researcher's position had on the research, the researcher minimized her role in the professional learning communities to observer and used the shared leadership approach. The department chair for each subject took the lead and facilitated the PLC meetings. The shared leadership approach allowed the school to maintain a positive school culture and helped develop a shared purpose (Carpenter, 2017). The shared leadership also allowed the researcher to observe the teachers' true interactions without her input affecting their behavior.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

One of the limitations for the researcher was being an observer-participant. As the observer-participant, the researcher's purpose is explained to all participants, and the researcher can record data as they occur (Glanz, 2014). This was a limitation of the study because this format may have limited participants' willingness to be transparent. The researcher was part of the building leadership team, and her presence during observations may have led to participants limiting the information they provided.

Conducting an action research study while teachers and other participants were still working full-time was a limitation of the study. It was sometimes challenging to get the participants to complete the surveys in a timely manner. Although they were given a week to complete the surveys, the teachers needed reminders to complete the surveys because they had their daily responsibilities to tend to. The district also had several surveys distributed around the same time, which added to teachers forgetting to complete the surveys distributed by the researcher in a timely manner.

Time to complete a study of this magnitude was a major limitation. Due to the nature of the doctoral program, the research was regulated to just a couple of months. The time constraint shortened the researcher's time to solicit more participants and decreased the time interventions were implemented.

Another limitation was attending the focus group at the end of the two cycles. It was challenging to schedule a date and time when all participants could attend. Teachers had different family and work responsibilities. Ultimately, the researcher chose a date and time most participants could attend. The researcher also conducted the focus group virtually. The virtual format allowed teachers who were not physically in the building the opportunity to participate in the focus group.

The researcher used a couple of delimitations strategies in this study. To collect as much data from the surveys and the focus group, the researcher sent email reminders to participants to complete the survey. The emails also included the approximate time it would take to complete the survey to show teachers that the survey wouldn't be too much of an interruption to their schedule. The researcher was also flexible with the time needed to respond to the surveys. The original plan was to have participants complete the surveys within three days. The time was extended to one week to allow participants more time to complete the surveys. These mitigations permitted the researcher to maximize the data collected from the participants.

### **Chapter Summary**

Qualitative action research was the best method for research at the Career Academy because it allowed the teachers to continue with their daily responsibilities as the research was being conducted. The research utilized surveys, observations, and focus groups to collect the data

for this research. The limitations and analysis were addressed in this chapter, and the data collection methods were aligned with the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

Teacher participation in PLCs was an important goal for the leaders at the Career Academy. Although it was a mandate from the district, the school leaders understood that improving teacher practice could also lead to improving student achievement. The findings from the research explored the leadership practices that may improve teachers' motivation toward participating in PLCs.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

The study provided the opportunity to examine what PLC-related leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method was the most suitable. The goal was to assess the school's approach to professional learning communities from various perspectives and determine how the leaders could facilitate positive change to improve PLC participation among teachers. While there was an abundance of research on what constituted an effective PLC, there was no research available on how to enhance PLCs in a career academy with teachers who had traditional and non-traditional educator training. Moreover, there was insufficient research on what practices increased teachers' motivation to participate in PLCs and how those practices

benefited a Career Academy.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

Chapter four presents the qualitative action research findings at the high school Career Academy. Professional Learning Communities (PLC) were a form of Professional Development that allowed teachers to improve their practice while collaborating with their colleagues (Igor, 2022). To enhance student learning, the district and the Career Academy implemented a PLC curriculum in 2019. The school and district leaders created Professional Learning Communities called Learning Teams, in hopes that the collaborative nature of PLCs would increase teachers' classroom practices, student state testing results, and student learning.

Based on the results from a needs assessment on professional learning, it was apparent that the teachers and the school leaders at the Career Academy disagreed with what would constitute professional learning communities that the teachers would be motivated to engage in. There was an apparent discrepancy between what teachers felt they needed from PLCs and what the school leaders felt teachers needed. This chapter discusses the context of this qualitative action research and its findings.

## **Context of the Study**

The context of the Career Academy was important to exploring leadership practices for PLCs that teachers would be motivated to participate in with or without a mandate. The Career Academy was considered a charter program in the state of Georgia. It was located in a suburban area about 26 miles east of Atlanta, with a population of approximately 90,896. The district had 11 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 3 high schools, and 5 non-traditional schools, which served a little over 16,000 students. The students in the district came from diverse backgrounds. The district was comprised of 68% African American, 15% Hispanic, 12% White, 3% multi-racial, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander.

Students from the three high schools could take courses at their base school and the Career Academy. Because of transportation and block scheduling, students either took only their pathway class during one period or attended for three periods which was a combination of their pathway and academic classes. All students took their first-period class at their base school, and all content areas were available at the Career Academy, except for math.

In 2019, the district required all schools to meet for weekly professional learning community (PLC) meetings. During the meetings, teachers collaborated to review student data, discuss instructional strategies, and develop plans to improve student achievement. The problem at the Career Academy was that teachers attended the weekly meetings because they were mandated to attend. Based on the results from the needs assessment, they did not feel that the PLCs were beneficial to their practice, they felt PLCs did not improve student learning, and PLCs infringed on the time they needed to complete their daily teacher responsibilities. The motivation to take an active role in PLCs was deficient.

In the summer of 2021 and 2022, a needs assessment survey regarding PLCs was given to the teachers at the Career Academy to solicit information about teacher needs and suggestions on improving professional learning development for the upcoming school years. The survey was completed by academic, career-tech, and special education teachers. The results revealed a significant disconnect between what the school leaders thought teachers needed in a professional development curriculum for the upcoming school years and what skills teachers felt they needed to improve to increase their instructional skills.

Adding to the challenge of improving the PLC experience for teachers was the unique makeup of the school. The school employed academic teachers with traditional educator training and experience, along with career tech teachers with no educational background or formal training. All career tech teachers were hired directly from their field of expertise. The teaching experiences of the CTAE teachers in the study ranged from one to about 12 years of experience working at the Career Academy. The academic teachers' experience ranged from about five years to 22 years of teaching. Unlike the CTAE teachers, the academic teachers have all had formal teacher training.

Another unique aspect of the school's instructional makeup was that many teachers were the only teachers who taught a particular Career, Technical, Agriculture, and Engineering (CTAE) or academic class. Teachers at the Career Academy who were the only ones who taught their particular course were called singletons. Multiple teachers taught the same subject for academic courses but did not teach the same course within the subject area. For example, there were five Social Studies teachers, but each taught a different course. Only two teachers taught the same United States History course. As a result, teachers were not only grouped in PLCs by subject, but they were also grouped based on perceived needs and educational experiences. Still,

most teachers did not have a collaborative team who was familiar with their particular curriculum.

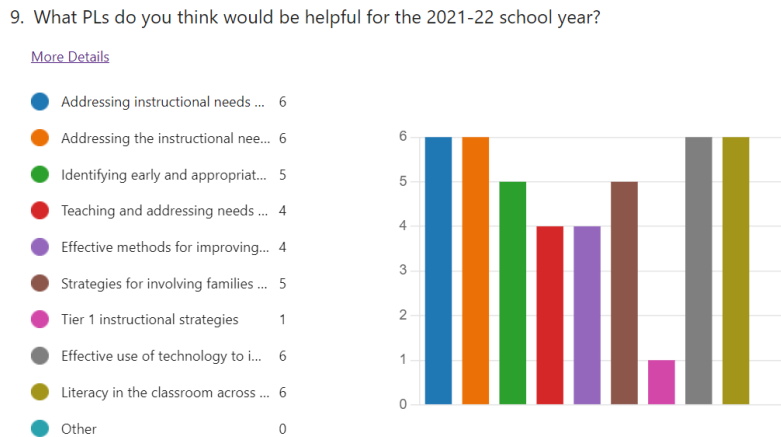
The Career Academy, with direction from the district, had to continue with the requirement of having PLCs in the 2022-2023 school year. The Career Academy called their different PLCs Learning Teams (LT). They decided to name it differently from the homeschools because the setup of PLCs at the Career Academy differed from the traditional high schools. The conventional high schools named their PLCs only by subject. However, due to the non-traditional setting of the Career Academy, PLCs were structured and named differently. The Career Academy decided to create LTs not only by subject but also by the years of experience of CTAE teachers. The academic teachers' LTs were based on subject, but the CTAE teachers' LTs were created to ensure that each of the two groups had a fairly even combination of teachers with some teaching experience being grouped with teachers with little to no experience. The goal was to ensure that there was support for inexperienced teachers embedded within the CTAE LTs. The Career Academy had CTAE LT 1 and CTAE LT 2. The numbers were only used to distinguish between the two CTAE Learning Teams groups.

The data collected from the needs assessment surveys dealt with Professional Learning needs for the 2021-2022 and the 2022-2023 school years. When the survey results were collected, school leaders had already created a Professional Learning plan, and none of what the teachers felt they needed or wanted was part of the plan. For the 2021-2022 and the 2022-2023 school years, the career academies PL and PLC focuses were Tier 1 instruction, classroom management, and improving 9th-grade retention rates at the Career Academy. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show what the teachers wanted to focus on during PL and PLCs.

Figure 4.1 and 4.2 illustrates what teachers thought would be helpful PLs and the PLCS during the 2021-2022 and the 2022-2023 school years.

### Figure 4.1

#### What Teachers Wanted from PL and PLCS—2021-2022



### Figure 4.2

#### What Teachers Wanted from PL and PLCs—2022-2023

8. What PLs do you think would be helpful for the 2022-23 school year?

14 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	NA
2	anonymous	Creative use of technology
3	anonymous	Constructing and managing IEPs and SEL for the new classroom environment.
4	anonymous	I feel like i could use a PL pertaining to my CTSO or a proper training on creating a pacing guide.
5	anonymous	instructional strategies/differentiated instruction
6	anonymous	I am interested in professional learning that is respectful of our time. Professional learning that people can sign up for is always a good option.
7	anonymous	Practical ones where people share what is being done in classrooms.
8	anonymous	I'm not sure because I think some PL's are helpful, but most times I don't feel they are helpful because I'm thinking about the other tasks that are my plate and I that PL time can be used for those tasks
9	anonymous	Creative and engaging formative assessments.
10	anonymous	A lesson on how best to motivate students would be nice, particularly for those students that are generally apathetic in all their classes.
11	anonymous	Writing and summarizing strategies. Argumentation and using evidence.
12	anonymous	How to stay resilient as a teacher in time of change and crisis.
13	anonymous	Trainings for Stop the bleed, CPR, First Aid, and Narcan. Other trainings should be about video production and instructional technology. We should also switch back to teams for some meetings.
14	anonymous	Lesson plans

For the 2022-2023 school year, teachers were asked why they attended PLC meetings, and the majority stated that they attended because they were mandated to attend. Figure 4.3 shows the result of that particular question from the needs assessment. This data led the researcher to study which leadership practices could be implemented to change teachers' motivation toward attending PLCs.

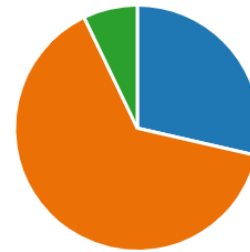
**Figure 4.3**

*Why Teachers Attend PLCs*

12. Why do you attend PLCs?

[More Details](#)

<span style="color: blue;">●</span> I find it helpful	4
<span style="color: orange;">●</span> I am mandated to attend	9
<span style="color: green;">●</span> Other	1



Although there have been many studies about Professional Learning Communities, the researcher could not find any that discussed high school career academies and the unique obstacles they face with PLCs. The Career Academy in this study had a few unique aspects that most secondary schools with PLCs did not encounter. One of the unique aspects of the Career Academy in this study was that 30 of the 34 teachers were the only ones who taught their particular content. There were only two sets of teachers who taught the same course. Two U.S. History and two CTAE Healthcare teachers were the only teachers who taught similar courses. This created what the school called "singletons." Teachers who did not have a fellow teacher who taught the same course. For those particular teachers, they did not fully experience the community portion of professional learning communities.

## Action Research Implementation Team

In preparation for the study, the researcher approached several CTAE, special education teachers, and academic teachers to create the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). The ARIT consisted of seven staff members representing different perspectives of the school. The team included an administrator who supervised both CTAE and academic teachers, two special education teachers who assisted students and worked with teachers in both CTAE and academic classes, an academic teacher with over fifteen years of experience, the instructional coach, and a CTAE teacher with over five years of experience. The ARIT met three times to discuss the structure of the study, and they were vital in helping the researcher lay out the format and timeline for the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the team members.

Table 4.1 presents the ARIT members and their roles at the Career Academy.

**Table 4.1**

*Action Research Implementation Team*

<b>Team Member</b>	<b>Primary Role at the Career Academy</b>	<b>Role in Action Research</b>
Primary Researcher	Special Education Specialist/Assistant to Administrators	Leads and facilitates research along with the design and implementation team.
Anne Randle	Assistant Principal	Administrator. In charge of all professional learning conducted at the academy. Provides expert knowledge in professional learning and how the information is transferred to classroom instruction.

Shawn Banks	Instructional Coach	Provides expert knowledge on teachers' instructional needs and the transfer of knowledge from PLCs to the classroom. It also offers expert knowledge in coaching and teachers' needs.
Randolph Ford	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over ten years of experience and participates in multiple PLCs.
Angela Reed	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over four years of experience and participates in multiple PLCs.
Alicia Knight	CTAE Instructor	Career instructor with no formal training in education. Fourth year in education and the Career Academy.
Sarah Jefferson	Academic Instructor	Social Studies teacher with formal education training and over 15 years of experience.

### **Action Research Design Team**

The action research design team (ARDT) comprised school personnel from different aspects of PLC participants. The ARDT included an administrator, a CTAE teacher leader, an academic teacher leader, the instructional coach, and two special education teachers. The Career Academy had a unique approach to education. As a result, it was essential to have teachers with CTAE and academic backgrounds represented. Table 3.1 presents the members of the ARDT.

The Action Research Design Team included some of the members from the Action Research Implementation Team. However, the researcher preferred to work with a smaller group to meet and discuss interventions, data, and needed adjustments throughout the study. The Action Research Design Team consisted of the same administrator, one special education

teacher, one CTAE teacher, and one academic teacher. The members of the ARDT are presented in Table 3.2.

The Action Research Design Team assisted with creating the structure of the research and the interventions that were put in place, and they assisted with the questions for the surveys and focus group meeting. ARDT members were a great source of information because they consistently interacted with participants and other staff members, and their interaction with their colleagues helped structure the direction of the research.

**Table 4.2**

*Action Research Design Team Members (Pseudonyms used)*

<b>Team Member</b>	<b>Primary role at the Career Academy</b>	<b>Role in Action Research</b>
Primary Researcher	Lead Teacher for Compliance for Special Education, Assistant to Administrators	Led and facilitated research along with the design and implementation team.
Anne Randle	Assistant Principal	Administrator. In charge of all professional learning conducted at the academy, and she provided expert knowledge in professional learning and how the information is transferred to classroom instruction.
Shawn Banks	Instructional Coach	She provided expert knowledge on teachers' instructional needs and the transfer of knowledge from PLCs to the classroom. She offered expert knowledge in coaching and teachers' needs.
Randolph Ford	Special Education Instructor	Teacher with over ten years of experience. Participated in multiple PLCs.

Alicia Knight	CTAE Instructor	Career instructor with no formal training in education.
Sarah Jefferson	Academic Instructor	Social Studies teacher with formal education training and over 15 years of experience.

### **Findings from the Case**

This action research case study examined what leadership practices could motivate teachers to participate in PLCs with or without a mandate. All teachers who were required to attend PLCs were given the opportunity to participate in the study. The ARDT met monthly to discuss interventions, surveys, observations, and the focus group. The researcher met with the ARDT to debrief and reflect throughout the process. The ARDT participated in a focus group to wrap up the study.

The study uncovered many findings, and the themes emerged through inductive analysis. Inductive analysis is defined as an approach that allows the data to speak for itself (Bloomberg, 2019). The following sections will detail each action research cycle's findings.

### **Action Research Cycle 1**

The first action research cycle started in November 2022, three months into the new school year. The cycle lasted for the entire month of November. LTs at the beginning of the school year met once a week after school. The Action Research Design Team met in October to discuss the different reasons Learning Team meetings lacked teacher attendance and engagement at the Career Academy and which interventions could be implemented to improve their LT experience.

#### **Cycle One Intervention- Number One**

The Action Research Design Team gathered information from their colleagues and the participants from the research to discuss possible interventions. All the teachers at the Career

Academy had a planning period at the same time during the first period of the district's high school schedule. Students enrolled at the Career Academy were also enrolled at their local homeschool, and they attended their first-period class at their homeschool and were bused to the Career Academy throughout the remainder of the day for various classes. Students having to attend their first period class at their homeschool allowed the teachers at the Career Academy to have a common planning period during first period.

Administrators and teacher leaders found that attendance at the after-school meetings was lacking, and teachers were disengaged. The ARDT also found that when meetings were held in the afternoon, there was a time constraint to complete the meeting between the dismissal time and the teacher's contractual work hours. The afternoon sessions gave LTs approximately 30 minutes to meet, which was insufficient to get through the agenda or address teachers' needs. The ARDT also observed that many teachers had to leave during after-school meetings to pick up their children or coach extracurricular activities. When discussing the option with Mr. Thomas, he stated, "I have tutoring sessions after school, and taking one day to go to PLCs is a waste of my time. I would rather spend the time helping my students."

Ms. Randle, the administrator of the ARDT and the ARIT, was also the administrator in charge of professional learning at the Career Academy. She stated, "it seems like once the bell rings at the end of the day, most teachers are thinking about leaving or what they have planned for the evening and not PLCs." Based on the data from the needs assessment, feedback from staff, the school schedule, and the school's makeup, the Action Research Design Team decided for November, the first intervention for cycle one was to change the PLCs from after-school to the morning during the teachers' common planning period.

## **Cycle One Intervention-Number Two**

The Action Research Design Team discussed adding a second intervention during cycle one, to be implemented along with changing the PLC time. The researcher and the administrator planned to use the study to make vital changes to LT meetings. With that in mind, the ARDT discussed having two interventions during cycle one. Based on conversations with colleagues, and data from the needs assessment, the ARDT wanted to address the frequency of LT meetings during the first cycle of the research, along with changing the time. In the past, LT meetings were held every week.

The ARDT stated that their colleagues felt that weekly meetings took away from their other responsibilities. Among other regular teacher responsibilities, the teachers at the Career Academy were still required to attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings for special education students and 504 meetings for students with medical impairments. The Action Research Design Team agreed that the frequency should be addressed along with the time change. To address teachers' concerns about PLCs taking time away from their daily tasks, the second intervention implemented was decreasing the frequency of meetings from once a week to twice a month during November of 2022.

## **Action Research Cycle Two**

Based on the positive feedback from participants and teachers regarding cycle one interventions, the administrators decided that the interventions from cycle one to lower the frequency of LT meetings and changing them to the morning common planning period would continue for the remainder of the school year. The Action Research Design Team met to review the results of cycle one and to discuss possible interventions for cycle two of the study. Unfortunately, LT meetings were canceled for December 2022, and cycle two was postponed to

January 2023. With the theoretical framework in mind, the ARDT discussed another aspect of LT meetings that teachers mentioned multiple times that took away from their desire to participate in PLCs- the lack of autonomy. The district and the school created all agendas for all PLC meetings with no input from teachers. The district's agendas were uniform for all PLCs across the grade bands. The agenda generated for traditional high schools was the same one used at the Career Academy. The agendas dictated what the teachers should discuss during their LT meetings.

Along with the previous interventions, the ARDT decided that the intervention for cycle two would give LT leaders the opportunity to create agendas for their LT meetings in January of 2023. All LT leaders were informed of the change in December so they could be prepared for LT meetings in January. Their agendas were created based on the need of their particular Learning Team. One of the team leaders, Frank Harvey, stated, "I have so much that our teachers need to work on that's not on the district's agenda. I don't understand why they feel the need to tell us what to talk about." The differences between the two agendas illustrate the focus of PLCs at the district level and the Career Academy. The team leader's agendas were focused on content and support, as presented in Table 4.3. The district's agenda was focused on improving test scores and lesson plans, as presented in Table 4.4.

### **Table 4.3**

#### *Sample Department Chair Agenda*

PLC Agenda – 24 January 2023

- 1. Welcome – Check in with everyone to see how you are doing personally.**
- 2. Where are you in content?**
- 3. What support do you need from within the building? From county office?**
- 4. Planning ahead: upcoming assessments and projects.**

The two tables demonstrate the discrepancy between what teachers wanted to discuss in their PLCs and what the district wanted discussed in the PLCs. The district’s focus was CUA (Common Unit Assessments) created by the district, the data, and the remediation plan connected to the assessment. The LT leaders wanted to discuss the content teachers were working on, how teachers could be supported, and upcoming classroom activities.

**Table 4.4**

*Sample District Agenda*

<b>RCA PLC Agenda/Meeting Minutes</b>		
<p>Date:</p> <p>Goal/Focus for the Meeting: Lesson Plan Template</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">Meeting Norms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting Norms: Be flexible.</li> <li>• Start on time</li> <li>• End on time (enter time here)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Be Present:</li> <li>○ Focus on Learning</li> <li>○ Collaborative Culture</li> <li>○ Focus on Results</li> <li>○ Respect each person’s voice</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Be Prepared</li> </ul> </div>	
Action Items	Notes:	Next Steps/Person In charge of task
Review Norms; Assign recorder to take and submit minutes assign time keeper.	N/A	N/A
CUAs	Data talk; what can we do to improve scores	All
Remediation plans	How can we help students moving forward	All
██████ data talk	How do we compare across the county; discussion about next meeting	All; ██████, ██████, ██████

**Surveys**

Surveys were used to gather baseline data and gather data from interventions at the end of each cycle. The researcher used Likert Scale-type surveys created and distributed via Microsoft Teams to all participants. The surveys were used to collect data on how the change in leadership practices affected teachers' views toward LT meetings and how the interventions affected their

LT experience. It was also an opportunity for the ARDT to collect data that guided decisions throughout the study.

The surveys were distributed immediately following the end of each cycle, and participants were given a week to submit their responses. Surveys were kept to a maximum of four questions to ensure that the survey didn't impede on participants' other daily responsibilities. The survey questions and results were discussed with the ARDT to ensure validity and trustworthiness. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 gives a sample of the survey questions.

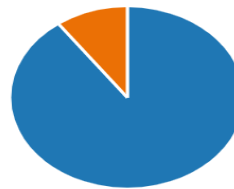
**Figure 4.4-Cycle 1**

1. Has the ability to have your PLC in the morning during your planning period as opposed to after school been helpful to your PLC experience?

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

● Yes	9
● No	1



**Figure 4.5- Cycle 2**

Which agenda is more helpful to you when participating in your PLC? (0 point)

[More Details](#)

● Agenda created by the district	1
● Agenda created by your Depart...	13



## Observations

Informal observations began at the start of the 2022-2023 school year so the researcher could begin to understand the dynamics of the various Learning Teams and as part of the researcher's professional responsibilities. Formal observations began once interventions were

implemented in November of 2022. Observations were completed using an observation guide (see Appendix E) to ensure consistency and structure when gathering the data. The observations during the research played an important role in understanding the interaction between teachers and leaders.

During the November 2022 PLCs, the Learning Teams still used the agendas from the district. During January (2023) observations, LTs used agendas created by the LT leaders. Meeting norms were used and reviewed at the beginning of all the sessions. Teachers, whether they were participants in this study or not, seemed to get along well, except for one academic LT member and one CTAE LT member.

A little tension was observed during one of the CTAE LT meetings. At the onset of the meeting, a few members expressed more than once that they did not want to be at the meeting. There also seemed to be a discrepancy between the district's agenda and what the members wanted and did discuss. One member was new to the school and needed support with grading, classroom management, and lesson planning. The team members were supportive but ran out of time and couldn't complete everything on the district's agenda. Another team member who was new to teaching and the Career Academy did not participate. Although she admitted that she wasn't familiar with many of the school's procedures, she was not receptive to the suggestions given to her by her colleagues. She was clearly uninterested in anything that was being discussed during the meeting.

During the Science LT meeting, one member noticeably did not get along with the rest of the team. During the meeting, his body language, tone, and behavior made it abundantly clear that he did not want to collaborate with his peers. In fact, several times throughout the meeting, he whispered that he did not want to be there and did not want to have to interact with the

members of his group. Despite being asked by the administrator a few times, he declined to participate in the activities during the meeting.

### **Focus Group**

The ARDT decided to include one focus group at the end of both cycles. The goal was to allow the participants an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the three interventions that were implemented and other leadership practices that could improve their PLC experience in an open forum. The focus group was done via Microsoft Teams to give the researcher better access to record and transcribe the meeting, but it also allowed participants to attend virtually rather than miss the focus group meeting.

Reflection and feedback were the main emphasis of the focus group. The semi-structured format allowed participants to respond to specific questions and freely give feedback on changes the district and the school could implement to increase teachers' motivation toward actively participating in LTs without a mandate. Ms. Sarah Jefferson summarized the message that most teachers conveyed about PLCs at the Career Academy. Ms. Jefferson stated:

If there is a goal that has to do with student improvement and we're talking about actually helping students grow, then that should be a process that comes from what teachers identify as areas of growth. So, a lot of times we wind up in PLC's talking about, well, how can we improve the use of learning targets when using learning targets is not the thing that is hampering my classroom or preventing my kids from being successful. Teachers are in hallway buzzing about something like, you know, right now there's a problem with phones. Or how do I get them to have class discussions or whatever the case may be? I'm trying to teach my students how to write, and that time is not being or PLC time is not being utilized

for that because we are ticking off boxes. Yes, we have to talk about the data from the CUA (district Common Unit Assessment). We have to talk about and what ways we plan to implement whatever new tool or whatever when we have other pressing things that we have identified as immediate needs through our own discussions, but they don't get precedence, or there are things that are sort of added on to the ends of meetings and things like that instead of being the focus of them. So, if it ensures if teachers are doing the job, then the things that we identify as needs should be the focus of our own professional learning communities.

Like Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1978) predicted, the participants felt they should have more autonomy in their learning. They were open about their feelings towards PLCs and what improvements could be made.

### **Chapter Summary**

The combination of academic classes and CTAE programs led to the PLCs being structured differently at the Career Academy. The ARIT and ARDT created the study's structure while keeping the non-traditional aspect of the Career Academy in mind. The participants took an active role in assisting with the research.

Through surveys, observations, and a focus group, the teachers at the Career Academy were clear on how they felt about their mandatory participation in PLCs. Although they understood that PLCs could be beneficial, they did not feel their current format benefited them and their students. The participants expressed that cycles one and two interventions could improve their PLC experience.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

The qualitative action research at the Career Academy was needed to improve PLC practices in a non-traditional school setting. Researching what leadership practices could improve the teachers' motivation toward PLCs was essential. The data collected in the research gave the researcher a clear understanding of what teachers needed that could lead to an improved PLC experience and what direction leaders can take to make those improvements.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

The study provided the opportunity to examine what PLC-related leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method was the most suitable. The goal was to assess the school's approach to professional learning communities from various perspectives and determine how the leaders could facilitate positive change to improve PLC participation among teachers. While there was an abundance of research on what constituted an effective PLC, there was no research available on how to enhance PLCs in a career academy with teachers who had traditional and non-traditional educator training. Moreover, there was insufficient research on what practices increased teachers' motivation to participate in PLCs and how those practices

benefited a Career Academy.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

Chapter 5 will discuss the themes that developed from the surveys, observations, and focus group data from both cycles of the Action Research. This chapter will discuss the analysis of the findings as it pertains to the theoretical framework and the logic model. The qualitative data analysis was aligned with the research questions and the action research structure created by the Action Research Design Team.

### **Themes**

Themes emerged from the data based on the surveys, observations, and the focus group conducted in the Action Research. The theoretical framework used in this study was a combination of Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1978) and Thomas Guskey's Change Model (1989). The theoretical framework consisted of five guidelines. (1) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing, (2) adult learners need individualized learning, (3) learning is self-centered through life situations, (4) adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs that learning will satisfy, and (5) experience is the richest resource for teachers. The core of the study

was to research Professional Learning Communities, a form of adult learning, and incorporate the components needed for teachers to adjust and accept change.

The themes were derived from an inductive coding data-driven analysis approach. Bloomberg (2019) stated that "The idea is that data leads to theory, and in pure form, an inductive approach builds on the idea that data can more or less "speak for themselves" and may offer us a "truly grounded" theory " (p. 233). The researcher allowed the themes to emerge from the data. The questions from the surveys, the observations, and the focus group were aligned with the research questions. The focus group was recorded, and the transcription was reviewed with members of the Action Research Design Team using the member-checking approach to ensure accuracy. Once the transcription was reviewed, the inductive coding process proceeded.

Following the data analysis, the researcher sought alignment between the findings and the research questions, as presented in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1**

*Summary of Research Questions Connected to Themes*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Themes Connected to the Research Questions</b>
What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Structural change is needed to meet teachers' needs.</li> <li>2. Teacher autonomy and input are important.</li> <li>3. PLCs need both time constraints and time to learn.</li> </ol>
What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Structural change is needed to meet teachers' needs.</li> <li>2. Teacher autonomy and input are important.</li> <li>3. PLCs need both time constraints and time to learn.</li> </ol>

What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

1. Leaders Should Limit their Input in the PLC Process
2. Teacher autonomy and input are important.

The teachers clearly understood what was needed for them to take a more active role in PLCs with or without the mandate. In fact, some teachers expressed that they can see the benefit of PLCs and would like to work on improvements that could benefit them and their colleagues.

### **Research Questions and Themes**

The first research question aimed to give the unique perspective of the CTAE teachers at the Career Academy. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs? Research question two was similar, but it addressed the needs of academic teachers. What do the teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs? The observations, surveys, and focus group showed that the CTAE and the academic teachers' unique needs in PLCs at the Career Academy were not being met.

Although there were unique needs for the two sets of teachers at the Career Academy, most themes impacted the two sets in similar ways. This study's data showed that the two groups had similar concerns regarding PLCs. The lack of motivation toward participating in PLCs affected both groups in a similar fashion. At the onset of the research, the researcher and the ARDT thought that the results would show that the two groups would have different needs in PLC, but the data collected showed otherwise.

## **Structural Change is Needed to meet Teachers' Needs**

One of the guidelines in the theoretical framework used as the foundation of this study was adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs that learning will satisfy. The participants in this study did not express that they did not want PLCs or a format to learn. On the contrary, most teachers stated they needed to participate in a format that allowed them to collaborate and work on their skills. One of the first-year teachers at the Career Academy asked that the Learning Team meetings include "Things that directly relate to us as individuals or as departments.". The same sentiment was also expressed by one of the veteran teachers, Mr. Thomas, who had over 22 years of experience. Mr. Thomas stated, "relevance to what actually happens in the classroom. Instead of analyzing pre-tests and county CUAs (Common Unit Assessments), look at behavior data and trends." Another teacher felt that "PLCs should focus more on sharing practical strategies." The teachers understood that continuous learning was beneficial. Still, the learning had to be helpful to them and their students.

In the first survey given to participants, one of the questions asked what practices they believed would be helpful to improve their PLC experience. A CTAE teacher, Ms. King, stated, "make it more relevant to career and technical classes, and not only academics." An academic teacher responded to the same question: "make them more applicable to our content areas." These quotes from the data were good examples of how the two sets of teachers had similar needs regarding PLCs.

The CTAE and academic teachers at the Career Academy were often called "singletons" because, except for two healthcare teachers and two U.S. History teachers, all the teachers were the only ones who taught their particular course. This caused most teachers to not benefit from the community component of professional learning communities.

The teachers felt that the structure of PLCs needed to be changed. Attending meetings with colleagues who did not teach the same course hindered the collaborative component of PLCs. With the majority of the teachers at the Career Academy being "singletons," the teachers would have appreciated collaborating with other teachers who knew and taught their specific curriculum.

### **Teacher Autonomy and Input are Important**

Another theme that emerged from the data collected was teachers had no input or ownership in the PLC process. Two of the components from the study's theoretical framework addressed this dynamic. (1) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing, and (2) learning is self-centered through life situations. The teachers felt very strongly about this aspect of PLCs. Mr. Alvin, a history teacher, stated simply, "have teachers included in the planning of PLCs", when asked what practices could school leaders implement that would motivate them to attend PLC even if they were not mandatory. A special education teacher, Ms. Reed, added to the conversation saying, "leaders can allow input of other teachers in creating content for PLCs."

One of the English teachers, Ms. Grant, stated, "including the teachers at the beginning of the year when the planning process begins would be useful to improving teacher buy-in." Ms. Reed summarized the sentiment around teacher input. She stated that "the district does not include teachers, and just as county office issues that have not been thoroughly flushed out and effectively demonstrated to the teachers, PLCs are the same." Mr. Ford, another special education teacher, was passionate when he spoke about teacher input during the focus group, and his colleagues emphatically shook their heads when he spoke. He stated:

If we felt like we were included in the process, then a lot of what goes on and a lot of what happens in those PLCs would have been different because now we will be talking about the things that really affect our

immediate environment, and that is not done. We don't feel included because, and it's not in my matter of feeling, we are not included, and as a matter of fact, we don't have any buy-in because it's not tailored to our immediate needs."

The lack of autonomy has affected the mindset and increased the resistance to change in PLCs at the Career Academy. The teachers felt that the intervention of creating their agenda in cycle two was helpful, and it should be something that the leaders should consider as a regular practice for PLCs. When describing one of the most challenging aspects of PLCs that affect their motivation toward participating, the teachers were open about being unable to choose what they discussed and what activities took place during LT meetings.

For the last few years, the district has created agendas for all PLCs throughout the district. This was a challenge for LTs at the Career Academy because of the unique nature of the school. The intervention in cycle two allowed teacher team leaders to create the PLC agenda for their Learning Team, and it addressed all three research questions. Allowing teachers autonomy in their learning addressed CTAE teachers, academic teachers, and leaders' roles in PLCs. The response from the teachers was positive across the board. Ms. Jefferson stated, "it makes more sense to allow teachers to create PLC agendas based on the needs that teachers identify for themselves." During the observations, teachers, teacher leaders, and the administrator acknowledged that having the teachers choose their agenda was more productive. Teachers mentioned that they enjoyed collaborating on strategies and topics they felt were beneficial to their content. Mr. Johnson expressed this point in the survey from cycle two by sharing:

Let the members of the PLC determine the agenda. It is supposed to be a learning community. If the district or administration determines the agenda, there is no

ownership in the process for the members of the PLC. It just becomes another required meeting.

Ms. Jefferson elaborated:

Because the things that we want aren't being incorporated, and I think that people who maybe have ideas have things they like to share are reluctant to want to bring them out and want to introduce them, mostly because, in general, we are like kind of disenchanted with the whole PLC process because we think that the agenda from the top down is just sort of pushing whatever new county initiative or whatever is going on. Then you know we don't want to get involved, and as a result, things sort of stay the same from the agenda all the way down.

One of the survey questions asked the participants which agenda they preferred. Did they prefer the one created by the LT leaders or the one created by the district? Out of the 14 teachers who responded to the survey, 13 felt that the agenda created by the team leader was more helpful than the one created by the district. One teacher took the time to elaborate on his opinion in the cycle two survey regarding agendas. The teacher stated:

Let the members of the PLC determine the agendas. It is supposed to be a learning community. If the district or administration determines the agenda, there is no ownership in the process for the members of the PLC. It just becomes another required meeting.

Though it was one change to their usual PLC process, the teachers felt having some ownership was beneficial.

## **PLCs need both Time Constraints and Time to Learn**

During PLC observations and the focus group, the teachers expressed that they believed PLCs infringed on their ability to complete all their other teacher responsibilities. Attending Learning Team meetings made them feel they could not complete their other tasks. Ms. Lang, one of the CTAE teachers, stated that "The only reason why I don't want to go is that I have a lot of other things on my plate.". The same thought process came from academic teachers. When discussing time, Science teacher Ms. Sands stated, "I think sometimes it's a waste of time, but then some of the ones I go to are really, really good. But the ones that are mandated are not some that I don't enjoy." The participants did go on to reveal that if they found the Learning Team meetings beneficial, they would not mind attending them. Mr. Sanders, the Audio/Video teacher, stated, "If the meeting has a purpose and they limit the amount of all staff meetings, teachers would be more motivated to attend PLCs."

One of the CTAE teachers was passionate about how PLCs affect their teaching time. In the teachers' responses to what practices could be put in place to improve motivation toward PLCs, he took the time to expound on his feelings. He wrote:

Often, PLs feel intrusive. We understand they are required in public education, but if we're dreaming. Strategies feel honoring our time is critical. Taking planning periods or after-school times is difficult-- we are limited in our time to grade, call parents, host student meetings, and tutor/plan (especially with the increasing number of diagnostic tasks being handed down from the county, taking away from the class time); when we are called into professional learning, there is pressure to be honoring to our colleague and pay attention while battling the frustration of needing to attend to teacher tasks.

A different aspect of time came when teachers began to discuss that they were not given enough time to learn, put strategies into practice, or master them. This point of view led to a passionate discussion when it was brought up by one of the English teachers. During a Learning Team observation, a district Literacy Coach attended the meeting to introduce two strategies that she believed would be helpful. As she explained her purpose for attending the meeting, she stated that she would return for the next few meetings with two new strategies during each meeting. Four of the seven teachers in attendance asked why she would come back with more strategies in such quick succession. Mr. Harvey made a point to say that as the researcher is here to observe:

I would like to point out that the Learning Coach plans to keep attending the meetings, and the fact that she would like to come up with new strategies is part of the problem that leads to teachers not wanting to participate in these meetings. Mr. Harvey explained that "leaders teach strategies, but they don't allow teachers time to use them in the class, master the skill, and make adjustments.

In cycle one's survey, some questions addressed teachers' sentiments toward time. One of the questions from the cycle one survey asked, did having your PLC in the morning during your planning period as opposed to after school been helpful to your PLC experience? Out of the ten responses, 9 participants responded yes. The second question asked, did PLCs twice a month as opposed to once a week be helpful to your PLC experience? 100% of the participants responded yes.

### **Leaders Should Limit Their Input in the PLC Process**

As the literature review in chapter 2 revealed, one of the most critical aspects of an effective PLC is the leaders' impact on the process. The third research question asked, what role

do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase their participation in PLCs without a mandate? The results from the research showed that leaders at the Career Academy should not do much. The participants were clear that leaders should guide the process, but they should allow the teachers to take the lead in their PLCs. One participant stated, "some of the problems is the implementation from outside the group."

The participants were asked how leaders can improve their PLC experience in several formats. During the focus group, the participants reacted enthusiastically to Ms. Jefferson's response. Her response was simple "They don't need to implement anything." She gave an example of what she meant, and I observed some participants clap as she spoke. Ms. Jefferson elaborated:

I think it's helpful if I think #1 autonomy and there is room for leadership saying these are some things we'd love for you guys to talk about. This is important. This is something that's happening. There's room for that for sure, but the implementation of like, I know you're not asking about it, but like our lesson plans, my lesson planning is sacred. I have a certain way that I do it, but having to fit into a prescribed way or somebody else's brain for lesson plans, you know, it's difficult. And I think there's something similar with that with PLCs.

### **Chapter Summary**

The themes that emerged from the data collected were directly connected to the research questions. The results showed that although CTAE and academic teachers may have different needs at the Career Academy, they had identical needs regarding being motivated to participate in PLCs with or without a mandate. The three themes that emerged from the data were (1)

Structural change is needed to meet teachers' needs, (2) Teacher autonomy and input are important, (3) PLCs need both time constraints and time to learn.

Research question number three addressed the role leaders play in PLCs. The results from the participants were clear. They believe leaders should trust that teachers know their needs. School and district leaders should guide the process, but it should be left up to the teachers to facilitate their PLC meetings. If school leaders allow the teachers to lead their PLC process, it could lead to teachers being willing to take a more active role in PLCs.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES**

The collaborative nature of PLCs was essential to building teacher capacity. This study provided the opportunity to examine which leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method improved teachers' motivation towards attending PLCs. The research aimed to explore PLCs from various perspectives and determine how school leaders could facilitate positive change that would motivate teachers to engage in PLCs with or without a mandate. This study filled a gap in the research on how schools can develop learning communities to increase teacher engagement toward PLCs at a Career Academy with teachers with traditional and non-traditional educational experiences and training.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aimed to examine which leadership practices could increase commitment among teachers to taking an active role in professional learning communities with or without a mandate. Teachers at the Career Academy did not find PLCs beneficial to their practice, which led to a lack of commitment to PLCs. The study wanted to examine what modifications leaders can make to increase teachers' desire to be more engaged in PLCs.

The study provided the opportunity to examine what PLC-related leadership practices were beneficial to teachers, when, and what delivery method was the most suitable. The goal was to assess the school's approach to professional learning communities from various perspectives and determine how the leaders could facilitate positive change to improve PLC participation among teachers. While there was an abundance of research on what constituted an effective PLC,

there was no research available on how to enhance PLCs in a career academy with teachers who had traditional and non-traditional educator training. Moreover, there was insufficient research on what practices increased teachers' motivation to participate in PLCs and how those practices benefited a Career Academy.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the framework for the research:

1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to participate in PLCs actively
2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?
3. What role do leaders play in implementing PLC practices that the teachers believe will increase teachers' participation in PLCs without a mandate?

Chapter 6 summarizes all aspects of this qualitative action research. The chapter summarizes the emerging themes and their implications for policy holders, future researchers, and career academies. The inductive analysis was used to allow the themes to emerge on their own. Chapter six connects the findings with the literature review, the research questions, and how it all impacted the study at the Career Academy.

### **Summary of the Research Design**

The case study occurred during the fall and winter of the 2022-2023 school year at a Career Academy in a suburban town east of Atlanta. The study was a qualitative action research study on what leadership practices can be implemented at the Career Academy to increase teachers' motivation toward participating in professional learning communities with or without a mandate.

### *Action Research*

The research was conducted in a qualitative action research format. Action research allows the researcher and the practitioners to put the research into practice as the research is being conducted (Mertler, 2016). The purpose of this research was to explore practices that could increase teachers' participation in professional learning without being mandated to do so. Action research was the best format for this study because it allowed the teachers to continue learning and collaborate while the study was conducted (Lynn et al., 2010). Mertler (2016) stated that action research and PLCs have many of the same foundations, and combining the two can lead to concepts that make sense. Mertler combined the two concepts to create Action Research Learning Communities. Mertler (2016) believed that the combination of the two concepts offers an opportunity for (1) a common and collective focus and vision, (2) sustained collaborative inquiry, (3) individualized, customizable, and meaningful professional growth, (4) true empowerment through collaborative, inquiry-based, and reflective practice. Action research allows research in education to be done in the school setting where real change can be accomplished.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Professional learning communities are a form of professional development (Zepeda et al., 2014). According to Zepeda (2019), "a PLC is a "school-wide professional development effort that involves the collective capacity of all people in the organization" (p. 91). PLCs are also a form of adult learning, and the research aimed to examine what changes could be made to improve the experience for teachers that could lead to their engagement in PLCs. The theoretical framework used in this study included components from Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (1978) and Guskey's Model of Change (1989).

In 1978, Knowles researched the practice of adult learning. In his research, Knowles learned that many adult learner programs, including those for teachers, had the same approach to learning as they did for children. As adults learn, their life experiences, beliefs, and habits influence what and how they learn (Knowles, 1978). The term andragogy defines the concept of adult learning. Andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn (Zepeda, 2019, p. 38). According to Zepeda, professional development is a form of adult learning that supports administrator, teacher, and student learning (Zepeda 2011).

Professional development is a form of adult learning; therefore, the adult learning theory and its principles served as the framework for this study. Knowles (1978) explained five concepts to adult learning (1) Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities. (2) Adults' orientation to learning is life centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects. (3) Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience. (4) Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in the process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it. (5) Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Knowles, 1978).

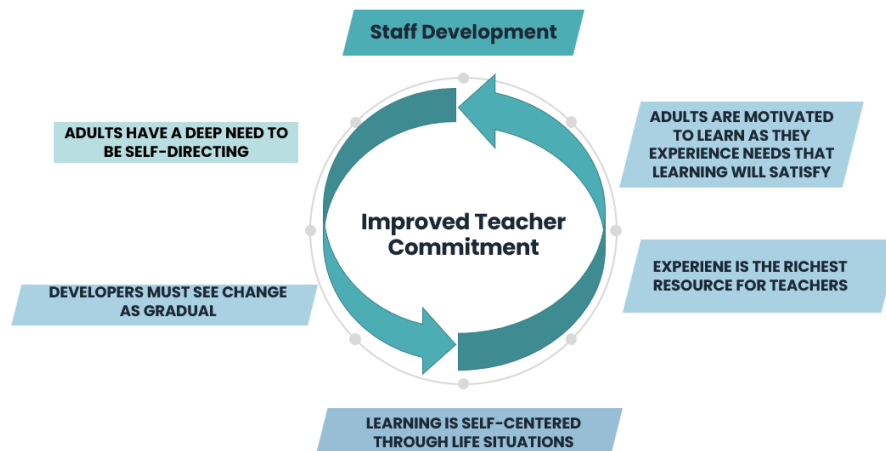
According to Guskey, professional development will not change teachers' beliefs and practices unless teachers can see proof that their strategies improve their students' learning (Guskey, 1989). He created the model for teacher change for professional development to simplify the professional development process and increase the teacher perceptions and beliefs

that lead to student learning. Guskey (1989) stated that "the premise of this model is that change is a learning process for teachers that is developmental and experientially based (p. 445). The model includes five stages. It begins with staff development, leading to changes in teachers' classroom practices, student learning outcomes, and teachers' attitudes and perceptions. There are three guiding principles of this framework. (1) developers must see change as a gradual and, in most cases, difficult process for teachers. (2) Any change that holds promise for increasing teachers' competence and enhancing student learning is likely to require extra energy and time, especially at the outset. (3) These requirements can significantly add to a teacher's workload, even when release time is provided (Guskey, 1989).

The theoretical framework presented in Figure 6.1 comprised the adult learning theory and the teacher change model.

**Figure 6.1**

*Theoretical Framework*



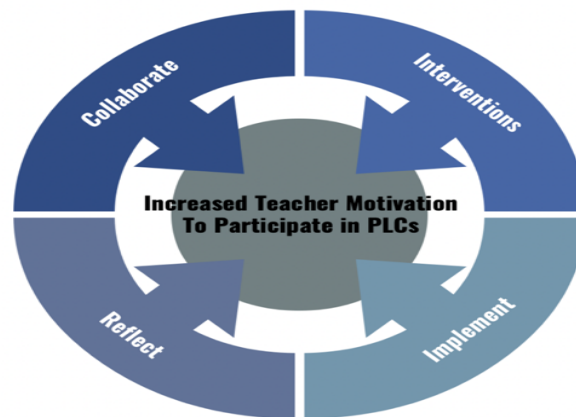
*Logic Model*

The components for the logic model used in this study were based on Riel's collaborative approach to action research. The collaborative research approach is an iterative framework that

includes a personal, organizational, and scholarly level. This study aimed to improve teacher participation in professional learning to improve teachers' practice, teacher learning, and the relationship between leaders, teacher learning, and student achievement. For this goal to be achieved and to create foundational change in professional learning, best practice shows that professional learning should be collaborative (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). Figure 6.2 illustrates the logic model.

**Figure 6.2**

*Logic Model*

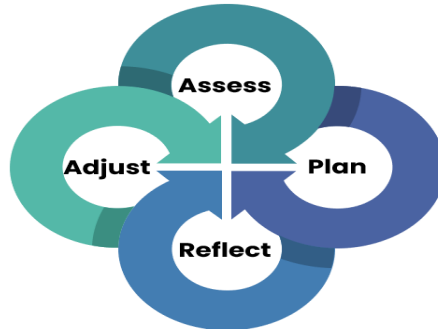


*Conceptual Framework*

The district where this study occurred had a detailed instructional framework called The Cycle for Results, which largely mirrors a traditional action research structure of blending planning, action, data collection, and reflection in a cyclical process (Glanz, 2014). This study used a modified version of that framework as the logic model. The framework is posted throughout schools; as part of the introduction to all training, and teachers are asked to tie their teaching process to the cycle. The action steps within the district's framework were used in this study, showing the cyclical nature of research.

**Figure 6.3**

*Conceptual Framework*



### **Summary and Discussion of the Findings**

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks, along with the logic model, were the foundation of the case study. The research questions guided the research. The findings from this study resulted from surveys given to participants after each cycle, observations, and a focus group conducted at the end of the study. The themes that emerged from the inductive analysis process had a direct connection to the research questions. Table 6.3 presents the research questions associated with the themes that emerged from the study's findings.

**Table 6.1**

*Summary of Research Questions Connected to Themes*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Themes</b>
1. What do CTAE teachers perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?	1. Structural change is needed to meet teachers' needs. 2. Teacher autonomy and input are essential. 3. PLCs need time constraints and time to learn.

2. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?

1. Structural change is needed to meet teachers' needs.
2. Teacher autonomy and input are essential.
3. PLCs need time constraints and time to learn.

3. What do teachers of academic classes perceive as practices that would increase a voluntary commitment to actively participate in PLCs?

1. Leaders Should Limit their Input in the PLC Process
2. Teacher autonomy and input are important.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Questions 1 and 2*

Research questions one and two were related to what practices can be implemented at the Career Academy to increase CTAE and academic teachers' motivation to attend and engage in PLCs without a mandate. The findings from the research had a direct correlation to the literature review that supported this study. Guskey (2021) discussed strategies for effective professional learning and stressed that needs vary for individuals and organizations. Guskey's six strategies for effective professional learning are:

#1: Focus on evidence-based practices.

#2: Provide guidance in balancing adaptation.

#3: Offer feedback to confirm the change makes a difference for students.

#4: Ensure the feedback is based on evidence that teachers trust.

#5: Plan to gather the evidence on the effects quickly.

#6: Provide ongoing support with pressure (Guskey, 2021, pg.56-58)

The literature shows that an effective professional learning curriculum should vary based on teachers' needs, environment, and improvement goals (Guskey, 1994). A slightly different perspective of an effective PLC was reported by Desimone (2011), who created five guidelines

that her research showed could lead to effective professional development. Desimone's five guidelines are;

**Content focus:** Professional development activities should focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content.

- **Active learning:** Teachers should have opportunities to get involved, such as observing and receiving feedback, analyzing student work, or making presentations, instead of passively sitting through lectures.

- **Coherence:** What teachers learn in any professional development activity should be consistent with other professional development, with their knowledge and beliefs, and with school, district, and state reforms and policies.

- **Duration:** Professional development activities should be spread over a semester and should include 20 hours or more of contact time.

- **Collective participation:** Groups of teachers from the same grade, subject, or school should participate in professional development activities together to build an interactive learning community (p.69).

As schools worked on increasing student learning through PLCs, research has been detailed on key components that can lead to an effective PLC. Guskey (2014) stated that "the effectiveness of any professional learning community, regardless of its content, structure, or format, depends mainly on how well it is planned" (p. 12). The following are critical components of effective PLCs that emerged from the literature. 1. Provide a clear structure and purpose for PLC meetings 2. Address the most pressing instructional challenges 3. Provide support from all levels of the school system. 4. Foster an atmosphere of trust. 5. Monitor the work of PLCs and

provide constructive feedback. 6. Support teachers' sense of efficacy and level of professionalism.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3*

Research question number three addressed the role leaders play in PLCs. Leaders play one of the most critical roles in creating a structured PLC, creating an environment of learning for teachers and students, facilitating data analysis, and creating the vision for the PLCs and the school (Carpenter, 2015). Danche and colleagues (2022) stated that "the main responsibility of school leaders should be the improvement of teaching and student learning" (p. 47). There was a lot of research that discussed the best practices of a school leader, but there was insufficient research on how leaders could build teacher motivation toward professional learning in the context of career academies.

School leaders' most vital role is facilitating student achievement (De Guzman, 2022). An environment where teacher learning is encouraged and supported is essential to an effective professional learning curriculum (DuFour, 2014). The leaders of professional learning communities significantly influence the program's success. An overwhelming amount of research on professional learning and, more specifically, professional learning communities discussed the need for teachers to have an environment where they trust their expertise will be valued. It will lead to improved student learning and collaboration in a culture where the exchange of ideas is respected (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006).

Similar to past research, the teachers at the Career Academy felt that their views and needs were not being recognized by school and district leaders. Based on the literature, creating a culture and climate for teacher learning is vital. Knowles (1978) stated that "adult learners are precisely those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid,

uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized situations of learning" (p. 11). The environment by which teachers learn and collaborate must be a trusting environment, flexible, and respectful of their expertise (Carpenter, 2017). It is the responsibility of the principals and other school leaders to create such an environment (Carpenter, 2017)

The foundation of PLCs is teachers' ability to collaborate to exchange instructional strategies and data that will lead to improved student learning (DuFour, 2014). School leaders and principals must understand their role and the link to student achievement (Spanneut, 2010). The literature was clear on the need for leaders to build relationships with their teachers to both know them personally and learn their skill set as teachers. Teachers tend to work harder, take an active role in PLCs, and are committed to student improvement when working in a building where mutual respect among teachers and leadership is present (Christiansen & Monaghan, 2006). School leaders must involve their teachers in PLCs as instructional partners (Ezzani, 2020).

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

Although the study was carefully designed, this qualitative action research study may have inherent limitations. The design and methodology within this study may have impacted or influenced some of the findings from the research. The study involved participants who were familiar with the researcher. This relationship may have affected responses among the teachers, resulting in less candid responses.

### **Implications and Recommendations for School and District Leaders**

The findings from this study gave a clear view of some of the practices the leaders on the school and district levels can put in place to improve teachers' motivation and active participation toward attending PLCs with or without a mandate. Through surveys, observations,

and a focus group, the participants expressed the need for leaders to allow them to be in charge of their learning and collaboration. The literature and the findings from this case study show that teachers should be given autonomy in creating their PLC, creating their agenda, and being leaders in their learning. It's critical for teachers to feel ownership in PLCs to be willing to engage and participate in them (DuFour, 2014). The participants did understand the role school leaders may play in guiding the process. However, school leader must involve their teachers in PLCs as instructional partners (Ezzani, 2020).

Structural change of PLCs was needed at the Career Academy. Due to the unique structure of the Career Academy, leaders should consider changing the structure of their PLCs. With several "singletons" at the Career Academy, the leaders should consider allowing the teachers to create a collaborative connection with teachers outside the school building. It may be more beneficial for CTAE teachers to collaborate with teachers who understand their curriculum by creating PLCs with teachers at other career academies. The academic teachers can also create a PLC with teachers who teach the same course at the traditional high schools within the district. The 'c' in PLC stands for community, and the community for both groups of teachers does not have to be limited to the confines of the school building. Teachers expressed the need to attend meetings relevant to their practice. Expanding PLCs outside of the Career Academy with technology can be easily arranged and would it would improve teachers' PLC experience.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Researchers**

Given the time constraints of this case study, future researchers would benefit from duplicating a similar study for an entire school year. Researchers could also benefit from expanding the number of participants in the study. As career academies increase in education, future research would benefit from studies about ways to support teachers in a unique teaching

environment. Career Academies are not structured the same, so research on how different career academies can benefit from effective PLCs is still needed.

A more in-depth examination of teachers' challenges with time constraints would be valuable to the field of education. Being able to assist teachers with finding the balance between adult learning and teacher responsibilities is an important topic that could also tackle teacher retention and increased productivity. This study could not address or find a solution for this issue, but this would be a critical topic that future researchers could explore.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Policymakers in the suburban district where the study occurred and policy makers in the field of education should consider teachers' needs. Leaders should not make decisions in a silo without getting input from the teachers impacted by those decisions. The teachers within any district are the ones who have a direct impact on student learning. Giving them autonomy and including them in the decision-making process is vital. Ensuring that teachers know they are valuable members of the educational community is essential to the success of student learning.

One major issue the researcher found interesting in the study was the lack of an evaluation system. An organization or school system should have a process where they evaluate the programs they put in place. The Career Academy and the district created the agendas, set up Learning Teams, and even created a schedule. However, they did not create a system to evaluate the process. Using the same method of planning, reflecting, adjusting, and assessing used by the district for instructional practices, should also be used for the district programs. Without an evaluation system, a program can continue in a state of dysfunction for years.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Professional learning communities are a great way to improve teacher skills and increase collaboration. However, teachers should be leaders in their learning, and the structure should be customized to each setting. School districts must trust that most teachers want to see their students succeed, and teachers should be the arbiters of that success. Leaders should continue to give guidance and structure, along with partnering with their teachers. As the teacher shortage continues, school and district leaders need to increase teacher input on initiatives, continuous change, and day-to-day operations of schools. Their time, knowledge, education, and influence on student learning should be considered and appreciated.

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Appendix A  
Needs Assessment

# Professional Learning Research Survey (Pre)

The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

\* Required

1. Name- Initials only \*

2. What do you teach? \*

3. How many years have you been a teacher? \*

4. How many years have you been teaching at RCA? \*

5. What is the most effective Profession Learning (PL) you have ever participated in? \*

6. What made it effective? \*

7. Why did you attend the PL? \*

- I thought my students and I would benefit from it
- It was mandatory
- Other

8. What PLs do you think would be helpful for the 2022-23 school year? \*

9. Please Indicate the best time for PL? \*

- District PL days
- During the morning planning period
- After school
- During weekly learning team meetings
- Other

11. Do you find PLCs helpful? \*

- Yes
- No

12. Why do you attend PLCs? \*

- I find it helpful
- I am mandated to attend
- Other

13. As you work on improving your practice through PLs, do feel supported by your leadership team? \*

- Yes
- No
- Neutral
- Somewhat

14. What practices/strategies do you believe would be helpful to improve your PL or PLC experience? \*

Appendix B  
Cycle One Survey

# Cycle One Research Survey

\* Required

1. Has the ability to have your PLC in the morning during your planning period as opposed to after school been helpful to your PLC experience? \*

Yes

No

2. Has the ability to do PLCs twice a month as opposed to once a week been helpful to your PLC experience? \*

Yes

No

3. What practices can leaders put in place to improve your PLC experience? \*

**Appendix C**  
**Cycle Two Survey**

## Professional Learning- Cycle 2

\* Required

\* This form will record your name, please fill your name.

1. Which agenda is more helpful to you when participating in your PLC? \*

- Agenda created by the district
- Agenda created by your Department Chair

2. Would having your Department Chair create your PLC agendas increase your motivation to attend? \*

- Yes
- No

3. What practices can school leaders put in place that would motivate you to attend PLCs even if they weren't mandatory? \*

## **Appendix D**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Why do you attend professional learning meetings?
2. Are most professional learning opportunities relevant to your work? How?
3. Do you feel included in the planning process? If not, what can be different?
4. What are some of the practices school leaders can implement that could improve your motivation towards PLCs?
5. How did the interventions impact your PLC experience?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss that we haven't covered in this session?

## Appendix E

### Observation Guide

#### Observation Guide

PL Topic-

Number of Participants-

Number of people participating-

Who is facilitating the PL?

How is the interaction between participants?

How is the interaction between leaders and teachers?

Are all those who were expected to attend in attendance? Are participants engaged?

How many participants stayed for the entire session? How many participants left the session early?

Any comments about how the session went?

Any comments on how the session can be improved? Other observations-

## **Appendix F**

### **Consent Letter for Action Research Participants**

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Walker Swain in the Department of Lifelong Education and Policy at The University of Georgia. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *How Can a Career Academy Move Their Professional Learning Participation from Compliance to Self-Motivated Commitment?* The purpose of this study is to examine the process and participation of teachers and school leaders on professional learning.

You are invited to be in this research study because you are a faculty member and/or administrator at the career academy where the study is being conducted.

#### **Participant Expectations**

Your participation will involve interventions during meetings, several observations, and participation in a focus group at the conclusion of the study. With your permission, the focus group will be audiotaped and transcribed to capture and maintain an accurate record of the discussion. The focus group will last 45-60 minutes.

As the researcher, I will also conduct several observations of you while you are involved in actions research team role. It is likely that I will be a participant-observer meaning the observations will occur during meetings in which I would normally be a participant because of my role as an action researcher as well.

The action research team will meet once or twice per month for 30 - 45 minutes during the six-month study. Your total time commitment will be approximately 20 hours. The duration of your participation will be from July to December of 2022, with no activity during the months of June and July.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty. Your participation in this study, or your decision not to participate, will in no way impact your evaluation or performance as a faculty member. If there are questions that may make you uncomfortable, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

### **Data Storage to Protect Confidentiality**

Every effort will be made to treat all information provided by you as strictly confidential. Basic identifying information will be collected including your name, contact information, and teaching/leadership experience. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. All data will be coded, stored securely for two years after the study, and will be used only for professional purposes. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used.

The focus group will involve other participants in the study. Confidentiality of the discussions in the focus group will be emphasized, however, the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality of others in the focus group.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Your participation in this study will in no way impact your evaluation or performance as a faculty member. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research and there is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study. The findings from this

study may provide helpful information on how independent schools can improve teacher leadership development.

### Participant's Rights

- My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to my employment status.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, Ives Cineas, at (-----) or [ici@uga.edu](mailto:ici@uga.edu), or the supervising professor, Dr. Walker Swain, at (---) ----- or [walker@uga.edu](mailto:walker@uga.edu).
- Questions or concerns about my rights as a research participant should be directed to The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board: (706) 542-3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).
- Audiotaping is part of this research. Only the researcher and the members of the research team will have access to written and taped materials. Please check one:

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to being audiotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT consent to being audiotaped.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

<b>Ives Cineas</b>	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

**Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.**

By signing and returning this consent letter, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for your consideration,

*Ives Cineas*