

TRANSFORMING A DISTRICT INTO A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY;
AN ONGOING PROCESS IN STUDENT AND ADULT LEARNING

by

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(Under the Direction of Karen Bryant)

ABSTRACT

Communities emerge when a collected group comes together around a common thread. The term “professional learning communities” first emerged in the 1960s as a response to the social isolation in which teachers performed their educational practices. The common thread of student learning linked professionals in a communal capacity. Over time, research has indicated that the seemingly simple act of creating a community of professionals around a common thread is, in fact, complex.

The purpose of this action research is to illuminate the underlying complexities involved in transforming one specific rural school district into a professional learning community with a focus on student learning. This study examines the roles of the district leaders, campus leaders, and teacher leaders, and it seeks to clarify their respective roles in the process. Building the capacity of collaborative teams is a blend of building a positive culture, creating appropriate conditions, developing systems of support, and promoting job-embedded professional learning. The practice of a continuous improvement process transfers into student learning as well as adult learning.

The following research questions guided the action research study:

1. How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?
3. What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

Guided by these research questions, teams of educators collected evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of current practices within the organization. The collaborative teams determined practices to abandon and practices that needed to be included in their continuous improvement processes. Recurring themes emerged throughout the study: (1) the campus leader must be actively involved in the process; (2) collaborative teams are most successful when they bring evidence and ensure the collaboration is transferring to daily instructional practices impacting student learning; (3) teacher efficacy increases when all voices are heard and are treated as an instrumental part of the process.

INDEX WORDS: Professional Learning Communities, Culture, Action Research, Evidence, Collaborative Teams, Capacity Building, Teacher Efficacy

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2021

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May 2021

DEDICATION

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many.

To my husband, best friend, and biggest supporter Stacy Walley, thank you for your sacrifices. When I wanted to give up, you wouldn't let me. When I wanted to delay the process, you removed the barriers. When I couldn't, you did. When I did, you cheered me on. You are my rock.

To my girls, Carly, Madison, and Mallory, you are my pride. You are my reason to not let go of something that is considered hard and overwhelming. As proud as I am of you, I want you to be proud of me. You three girls are my pebbles. You fill me up.

To my parents Tommy and Nelda Davis, your support and sacrifices are not unnoticed. You two are incredible. You two are my role models. When I grow up, I want to be just like you. You are selfless, giving, determined, protective, and multiplying. With six children and 19 grandchildren, you find a way to be on the doorstep of any of us who need you. Just when I think your jar is empty, you multiply your giving, your hugs, your love, and your support. I want to multiply.

And to our God. Daniel School District is the pseudonym given to the small, rural school at which this action research transpired. "Daniel" was chosen as the given name because it means "God is my strength." Thank you, God, for my strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to sincerely thank my major professor, Dr. Karen Bryant. You have a talent for motivating others. Your calmness, patience, encouragement always came at the time I needed it most. You were my secret gift throughout the process and the reason I completed what I started three years ago.

Dr. Jami Berry, your role in my journey is appreciated. You were always two steps ahead of me, paving the road to whatever comes next. You graciously pushed and wouldn't take anything less than our best. You are the epitome of what a great educator should do, and you have high expectations and lead your students there. I have a deep respect for you.

Thank you, Dr. Jamon Flowers, for your encouragement and smile. Your words reflect a passion that is contagious. As I presented, you left me with an excitement and anticipation to conclude my research. I was anxious to find the recurring themes for all rural school districts wanting to improve.

My UGA doctoral cohort is amazing. I looked forward to each class because of them. It didn't take long for the transition from classmates to friends to occur. I am so proud of each of them and look forward to watching their journey. Our UGA cohort "president," Stacie Coppola, served us well and became the driver of our journey. I am thankful for her leadership and her friendship.

Lastly, to the teachers and administrators of "Daniel" School District, thank you. You were so welcoming and gracious to allow me to complete my research even after I moved on to another position. You all want what is best for students and I appreciate your passion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
CHAPTERS	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem	2
Purpose of the Study	2
Research Questions	3
Definition of Terms	3
Theoretical Framework	4
Conceptual Framework	4
Overview of the Methodology	5
Intervention	6
Significance	7
Organization of the Dissertation	9
2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	10
Problem Framing in the Literature	10

Creating an Action-Oriented System	10
Implementing Professional Learning Communities	13
Sustaining the Process.....	16
Conclusion	17
Contributions.....	17
Strengths	18
Gap in Literature	18
3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	19
Theoretical Framework	19
Conceptual Framework	21
Action Research	22
Action Research Design Team.....	24
Action Research Design Implementation Team	25
Action Research Timeline.....	25
Research Design.....	27
Contextual Setting.....	28
Selection.....	29
Data Collection Methods	30
Data Analysis	31
Case Study	35

Validity and Trustworthiness	35
Subjectivity Statement	36
Chapter Summary	37
4 THE CASE.....	38
The Context.....	38
Problem Framing in the Context.....	38
Problem-framing Based on the Site	40
The Story and Outcomes.....	43
Interviews.....	51
Focus Group.....	53
Researcher Notes of Participant Observations.....	53
Action Research Team Artifacts	53
Researcher Journal Notes.....	54
Chapter Summary	54
5 FINDINGS.....	55
Introduction.....	55
Data Collection Connected to Research Questions	56
Chapter Summary	65
6 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	66
Summary of the Findings.....	66

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed	67
Major Findings Related to the Research Questions	68
Limitations of the Current Study	71
Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners	71
Implications and Recommendations for Researchers	72
Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers	73
Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts	73
REFERENCES	75
APPENDICES	
A EMPIRICAL FINDINGS	80
B OBSERVATION PROTOCOL.....	87
C TEACHER SURVEY FOR GAUGING TRANSPARENCY	88
D INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM.....	89
E GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	89

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Interventions	26
Table 2: Pre-research Interview Protocol	31
Table 3: Characteristics of the Daniel School District.....	40
Table 4: Monitoring Timeline.....	48
Table 5: Research Interview Protocol.....	52
Table 6: Themes by Research Question.....	57

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Overview	5
Figure 2: Theory of Action	20
Figure 3: Conceptual Framework	22
Figure 4: Research Design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019)	28
Figure 5: Action Research Cycle	33
Figure 6: System of Action Research Subject	35
Figure 7: Daniel School District Race/Ethnicity Statistics	39
Figure 8: Districts Located within the Same Region of the Daniel School District	42
Figure 9: 2-Year Proficiency Rate Difference	43
Figure 10: Focused Classroom Observations	59
Figure 11: Gauging Transparency	63

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *professional learning communities* is not new; it is a practice that has been in use for many years. However, interpretation of the practice has varied throughout the years. For the purposes of this action research paper, a professional learning community (PLC) is defined in accordance with the model set forth in the work of Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano (2011), who clarify that it entails the following three big ideas: 1) a pedagogical focus on learning rather than teaching to ensure high levels of learning; 2) an operational focus on team work as collective collaboration with common goals; and 3) a strategic focus on using student outcomes to determine how students are responding. These three ideas create an ongoing PLC process with an ultimate reward of increased student achievement.

Principals play a crucial role in creating the culture that leads to improved learning for both students and adults. Principals are not expected to know all answers or solve all problems, but they are expected to be able to motivate and encourage those surrounding them to join in the effort. This task is greater than mere managerial duties. The leader needs to provide and protect the time and structures for professionals to collaborate to pursue excellence for all students.

Distributing leadership is also vital to sustaining the PLC process. Educational practices have a reputation of replicating a swinging pendulum. The practice changes whenever a new program is introduced. In the same way, the trajectory of an education institution changes when there are changes in leadership. This means sustainability becomes more difficult to achieve when leadership is not well-distributed. “The message is unequivocal; sustaining the impact of

improvement requires the leadership capability of many rather than a few” (Bezzina, 2006, p. 164).

Monitoring is a key part of the process, ensuring both accountability and the collection of evidence. “In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done” (DuFour & DuFour, 2012, p. 45). Requiring evidence from products sets an expectation that products must be produced. When a collaborative team collaborates, there must be a system in place to ensure that team time is productive and focused on the right work. The principal must communicate and support the expectations to establish a process.

This action research examines the implementation of the PLC process in a small rural school district. It specifically delves into the actions of leaders in driving the transformation and processes of professional learning communities.

The Problem

The professional learning community (PLC) model is not a program or a practice that can be implemented and forgotten. “This too shall pass” is the mantra of many educators across the nation when faced with yet another program or mandate, and it is no different in Daniel School District as new initiatives are implemented. Teachers at Daniel School District have complied with a system that has been proven to be ineffective. Administrators focused evaluations on adult behaviors instead of a focusing on learning and analyzing student engagement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research was to implement and sustain a districtwide PLC with a focus on student learning, resulting in a collaborative district model. The district model was intended to create an ongoing process of monitoring student learning in a timely manner.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?
3. What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms are defined:

- *Professional learning community* (PLC) refers to an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. The PLC model operates under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (All Things PLC, 2021, “About” section).
- *Guiding coalition* is the kind of powerful group needed to sustain major change (Kotter, 2012). The guiding coalition is composed of leaders from across the entire school district charged with leading the district in striving to achieve their mission.
- *School improvement specialist* is a role given to an individual in the district designated to facilitate the development and accountability of school improvement planning. The school improvement specialist assists the staff and leadership in advocating, facilitating, and implementing strategies that improve student achievement and close the achievement gap.

- *Intervention team* is a team focusing on student results to determine the level of support a student needs in to improve that student's academics.

Theoretical Framework

This action research focused on a small rural school district in need of a transformation and chose professional learning communities as the avenue for this transformation. Therefore, the researcher applied the theory of action to bring a process to change. As explained in a piece published by the tech company Coffey on their website, “the Theory of Action is the delivery model for the Theory of Change” (“What is a theory of action?,” 2021). The action research theorized that by providing clearer expectations around the mission of the organization, the staff would set goals and move in the same direction, thereby operating as a collaborative culture. In turn, teachers were to provide clear expectations to students regarding what they were expected to learn. When one understands the target goal, one is more focused on reaching the goal leading to success. Therefore, the clear expectations provided by leadership to the teacher, and from the teacher to the student, allow all parties to engage in the educational process and develop a growth mindset of reaching the target. As DuFour (2010) phrases it, clarity proceeds competency.

Conceptual Framework

The goal of the researcher was to build an ongoing process that would transform a school district into an effective professional learning community to ensure high levels of learning for all students. The collaborative teams provided input, acted, produced output, and analyzed outcomes to determine if the actions were effective. The outcomes then directed the next steps while understanding the causal relationships to be replicated or revised. The cyclical process of the conceptual framework reinforces that the PLC model is operated as an ongoing process, not a

meeting or a program. It also provides a system of monitoring to ensure the process is being transferred into daily instructional practices.

The researcher, who was an independent not employed by the district, led the action research project primarily through the superintendent of the school district and participated as part of the action research team and design implementation team. The purpose of the action research was to create a sustainable process through specific professional learning communities in a small school district. Leaders drive change. Practices are more apt to continue with the leader leading the process and supporting teacher leaders (Williams, 2018).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Overview



Overview of the Methodology

The action research study addressed the practice of the PLC process in order to make it sustainable districtwide with a focus on student learning. In order to implement a sustainable districtwide model, the research developed an understanding of the similarities and differences in how each campus implemented the PLC process. The district is located on one campus with an

elementary school (grades PK–4), a junior high school (grades 5–8), and a high school (grades 9–12).

Action research (AR) is “an ongoing process of examining educational problems in school settings” (Glanz et al., 2014, p. 3. The researcher adopted the AR methodology for Daniel School District to study the needs, design interventions, and implement processes to ensure high levels of learning for all students. The AR team was selected by the researcher based on previous leadership skills and an individual’s potential to drive change through their leadership roles within the district. The AR team reported how these schools cultured themselves and cite ways in which they are operating as they approach a sustainable and actionable level of a professional learning community. They delved into each campus culture and its impact on daily instruction in order to better understand them.

The design implementation (DI) team focused on analyzing data to uncover evidence to determine how schools sustain their PLC efforts. Their research created culminating case studies of each campus. The educators participating in the DI team were viewed as leaders of their collaborative teacher teams or teacher leaders on their campus. The DI team communicated the implementation plan to their respective collaborative teacher team.

Informed consent was collected by the researched through a district-wide Daniel School District staff meeting. Additionally, a separate meeting was held with both the AR and DI teams to explain the planned action research and their contribution to that research in greater depth.

Intervention

Instructional support from the AR team and the DI team served as the primary intervention in this study. The type of instructional support needed was based on the evidence collected throughout the study and was intended for individual educators or collaborative teams.

The AR team determined which practices of the PLC process they would monitor as non-negotiables and which were negotiables. The AR team communicated the expectations to the staff and set a system of monitoring. Based on the monitoring of the practices, the AR team provided support to individual staff or collaborative teams. Whole staff professional development was planned based on the needs presented.

The DI team also created a system of monitoring practices and a discussion of evidence submitted. The DI team provided support through peer observations, one on one professional support, and partner teaming.

These interventions were intended to ensure that an ongoing process occurred during collaborative team meetings with a focus on student learning. In addition, the interventions were based on needs and provided an avenue to build teacher efficacy as they used their strengths to lead colleagues.

Significance

The research dealing with implementation of PLC processes is extensive. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) began with the question of changing organizational culture in order to implement the PLC process effectively. Change is a necessary for improvement. Benoliel and Schechter's (2017) research emphasizes the importance of the principal's role in leading change and being an active participant. In all the extant studies, building a collaborative culture is imperative to implementing professional learning communities. One of the many roles of the principal in leading change is empowering teachers to lead. DuFour's (2012) process changes the focus from evaluation to a focus on student learning. Changing culture is a process that takes time, and so it must be carefully approached. This study indicates that the culture of a district

mimics the culture of its collective parts. In order to change the overall culture, one must understand the culture of each of the components.

This study focused on not only how to transform a small school district, but how to sustain that transformation. The state in which the study took place invested resources in the intensive coaching of professional learning communities for three years. The culmination of the state project of intensive coaching expects the district to take what they have learned and sustain the process without the support from outside entities. “When ongoing support through the tools of job-embedded professional development is linked with instructional supervision, transfer of skills into practice becomes part of the job” (Zepeda, 2012, p. 68). In the study of this district, job-embedded professional development was not linked to instructional supervision from leaders within the organization, making sustainability an added component instead of a continuous practice.

There is a multitude of research on implementing professional learning communities as a continuous model of improvement, but there is a gap in the literature on sustaining the change when the leader of the organization did not drive the change. In turn, Hargreaves (2001) describes how teacher empowerment increases teacher efficacy and fosters change. Empowering teachers builds the capacity for sustaining change. However, in Daniel School District—a small rural school district located in a declining community—the district struggles to retain teachers from year to year. Developing effective professional learning communities takes time, and many districts do not have the time when the structures are not in place and personnel is in a constant state of flux. This action research accordingly focused on sustaining professional learning as a lasting expectation, regardless of the change in participants.

States traditionally provide professional development based on mandates to meet federal requirements and reaction to state accountability testing or based on what most schools need. The state Department of Education for Daniel School District invested three years of intensive job-embedded coaching based on the school needs. After three years, the state department intended for the school to share and sustain the practices learned. If this occurs, this study could impact the actions of other states across the nation and how they fund and implement professional development.

Organization of the Dissertation

An overview of the study is presented in Chapter 1, together with an outline of the problem and the purpose of the action research, the research questions, and the methodology used in the study. The literature as it relates to the action research study is explored through Chapter 2. The literature review outlines the research to support and implement the PLC process by developing a culture to sustain the work. Chapter 3 gives a more in-depth explanation of the methodology and the qualitative methods used to address the study. The context of the study is summarized throughout Chapter 4. The research questions directed the study in collecting findings that are described in Chapter 5. The findings are further discussed as related to the research questions and literature in Chapter 6. Also, Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the implications and recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Problem Framing in the Literature

School districts function as a system, but not all systems are effective. Framing this action research (AR), professional literature establishes the context for construction of an effective professional learning community based on a strong foundation with inherent elements that provide sustainability over time. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand the barriers to transformation and how to build on the strengths in existence.

This literature review discusses studies that examine the processes implemented by a professional learning community to sustain effective work, focusing particularly on student learning. Daniel School District received three years of professional development targeted to implement a professional learning community. After three years, pockets of success were evident within the district. The researcher sought to understand how to grow the PLC practices into an ongoing, districtwide process through the study themes outlined below.

Creating an Action-Oriented System

District leaders are interested in the larger question of how organizations and corporations establish structures and systems that allow for nimble and responsive change based on results. A review of the literature on culture change and leadership's role in fostering such change is an important step in identifying the characteristics of organizations that are well-positioned to adapt to change and associated communication practices for spreading change throughout an organization.

Changing the Culture

For the purposes of this study, *culture* refers to the norms, values, assumptions, and collective beliefs of each school (Buffum et al., 2015). Without addressing the root causes of a toxicity in a culture, the transformation of that culture proves unsustainable. Smith (2015) explains that “the roots of a toxic culture grow from lack of trust blocks the formation of professional relationships, impedes the flow of necessary information, and corrupts a school district’s identity” (p. 10). Anthony Muhammad (2018) defined culture as a mode of behavior, in contrast to climate which is a mode of feeling. Muhammad says that “simply feeling better about ourselves is not enough. It is going to take a deep reflection of our individual and collective behaviors and creating conditions that allow all of us to improve our practices and behaviors” (p. 27).

Vandeyar (2017) explores how a teacher holds the power to make educational change meaningful. Teachers want to understand the reasons for and to be a part of that change rather than simply of being directed to change. Many changes fail based on teacher beliefs and engagement. Change is driven by the beliefs of a program, by belief in leadership, and by the beliefs of students. Hattie (2012) measures the impact of factors in student learning. The top-three factors are all related to culture and belief of student achievement: 1) Teacher estimates of achievement – 1.62; 2) Collective teacher efficacy – 1.5; and 3) Student estimate of achievement or self-reported grades – 1.44.

Vandeyar (2017) relates a change in the educational setting to “political symbolism” (p. 379) when it lacks personal or internal commitment. Change simply for the sake of change does not guarantee meaningful outcomes. Therefore, educational leaders must balance internal, external, and personal perspectives.

Leadership's Role in Implementing and Sustaining Change

Fullan and Quinn (2016) outline the elements necessary for focusing direction in order to launch a system into action. They begin by identifying and developing a program purpose that is based on the moral imperative in education. In the quantitative research of Gurley, Peters, Collins, and Fifolt (2014), the failure to determine an organization's mission, vision, and values compounds the complexity of educational change. However, developing a mission, vision, and values is only the beginning of an organization's shift, and these components must be integrated into a foundation in which educators consistently revisit the mission to ensure all students are learning at high levels. As educators clearly define their purpose, a purpose unaccompanied by action is ineffective and meritless. According to Covey (2013), when all the members of an organization hold aligned missions and purposes, and when they combine that alignment with energy, they create a powerful force. Kotter (2014) sets out an 8-step process for leading change which specifies that educational leaders must develop and communicate the vision and strategies.

Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) assert that, "in working through this analysis, participants develop a common understanding of the specific problem or problems they are trying to solve. The process also serves as a test of whether a team can engage productively as a focused improvement community" (p. 216). As the researcher continued to develop an understanding of how the creation of a PLC process, Muhammad (2018) offered insight into resistors of change. Resistors require a logical explanation. Leaders must consistently share information, and followers must clearly understand it before compliance is possible. The shift to an agile organizational structure "requires leaders to present a compelling future and establish an authentic dissatisfaction with the status quo" (Edney et.al, 2019, p. 76).

Building an organization from inception entails a different approach than does shifting an organization that has been in existence for many years. The latter situation may be compared to building a plane that is already in flight: everyday actions must continue while continually shifting the organization (Rockwell, 2012). Edney and Bailey (2019) detail strategies for leading change to lessen fear including “communicating relentlessly” and “minimizing surprises” (p. 25).

Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) argue that, “in working through this analysis, participants develop a common understanding of the specific problem or problems they are trying to solve. The process also serves as a test of whether a team can engage productively as a focused improvement community” (p. 274). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016) provide more detailed steps for the organization to learn while continuing to do the work.

A PLC process is ongoing—it is a continuous, never-ending process of practicing education that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of a school, as well as on the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it. Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) follow the trajectory of four schools as they implement the Delaware Department of Education’s PLC mandate. Their study presented evidence that the school principal, as the instructional leader, strengthened the state initiative. Per Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016), “school principals potentially can influence the success of this mandate by determining how it is translated into practice” (p. 193). Buttram and Farley-Ripple found that the way principals interpret mandates influences the way teachers interpret mandates (p.196). Moreover, as Cranston (2009, p. 88) recognizes, perceptions of the process lead the actions of the teachers.

Implementing Professional Learning Communities

For the purpose of the current study, this literature review examined the infrastructure of professional learning communities. Creating an environment of trust and collaboration in a

profession that is guaranteed to need support requires an organizational shift in education. Students come with various needs that not all educators can solve, and teachers as well as leaders need support in their attempts to address those needs. However, implementing professional learning communities provides a transformation “from a culture of isolation to a culture that promotes a true collaborative learning organization.” (Pirtle and Tobia, 2018, p. 4)

Collaboration

Kotter (2014) argues that “a volunteer army needs a coalition of effective people—born of its own ranks—to guide it, coordinate it, and communicate its activities” (p. #). Schooling has become so complex that it is unreasonable to believe that a single individual, no matter how capable, can effectively lead the work alone (Eaker et. al, 2012, p. 15). Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) note that “interdependence is what organizations are all about. Productivity, performance, and innovation result from joint action, not just individual efforts and behavior” (p. 197).

As discussed by DuFour et. al (2010), collaboration is one of the three core tenants of the PLC process. Collaboration is more than creating a team of individuals to meet. Traditional schools have been collaborating for years. Collaborating as a team in a professional learning community is a decision-making process. In 1996, law required schools to make decisions as a school-based decision making. The law was intended for one decision making body to make decisions for a school.

What is “effective” when discussing professional learning communities? Pirtle and Tobia (2015, p. 2) describe an effective PLC as an infrastructure in which teachers collaborate via an environment of trust in order to grow professionally, leading to positive results in student performance. Their explanation, along with their step-by-step guide, is clearly articulated in

order to assist others in implementation. However, even though the steps are clearly stated, the success of their study may also be attributed to the two years of subsequent support the schools in their study received. The work of creating and developing PLCs is challenging and requires both time and sustained support to realize meaningful change. DuFour et al. (2016) lay out more detailed steps for an organization to follow in order to learn the PLC process while continuing to do its work. They begin with defining the mission and vision necessary to move the organization in a coherent direction. The first step is to identify an ongoing process, and the second is to determine and develop appropriate strategies.

An organizational shift in education is critical for creating an environment of trust and collaboration in a profession that perennially requires support. Students come with various needs that not all educators can solve; both teachers and leaders need support in attempting to address these myriad needs. However, implementing professional learning communities provides a transformation “from a culture of isolation to a culture that promotes a true collaborative learning organization” (Pirtle & Tobia, 2018, p. 4).

Martin and Rains (2018) argue that “creating collaborative teams involves choosing people for teams and supporting those individuals and teams in ways that promote both growths in individuals and growth in the school” (p. 27). Hooijberg et. al (2007) observe that removing all barriers allows best practices and ideas to grow while promoting collaboration.

Clarity

What is a professional learning community? Definitions of PLCs have been offered by researchers since the 1960s. Richard and Rebecca DuFour (2012) explained that developing a common vocabulary, clarity of purpose, and shared knowledge is necessary in the implementation of PLCs.

PLC is a process not a program, which is often misunderstood by others. It is ongoing—a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it.

Building an effective professional learning community has become an expectation in many states, but implementation is neither uniform nor smooth. DuFour (*Building a professional learning community, n.d.*) shares the experience of one superintendent that proved successful when releasing “autonomy with parameters” (p. 2). Within these parameters, the superintendent had to define which parameters were to be considered “loose” and “tight,” which further clarified expectations of PLCs.

In moving forward, an agenda is carefully composed to ensure the team serves as a problem-solving team with regards to student learning (Burns et al., 2005). Teachers, administration, and staff focus on student learning with preventative measures in place to avoid becoming a pre-referral team. The practice allows teachers to identify student skills and address needs immediately.

Sustaining the Process

Per Smith (2015), the maintenance of commitment to sustain a process requires effort, focus, and monitoring. Literature is reviewed by the researcher to understand the steps and protocols involved in sustaining a transformation.

Collective Commitments

Hargreaves (2001) suggests that there is a greater chance of sustainability when distributing leadership. Hargreaves continues, explaining that building teachers’ leadership

capacity gives teachers ownership. Furthermore, teacher efficacy is increased when teachers actively participate in decision making and make their voices heard.

Hinman (2007) describes the stages required to build the credibility of the process in a professional learning community. In that study, the initiative started with small momentum simply because it was an internal movement as opposed to a mandated push.

Conclusion

In demonstrating a continuous cycle of improvement through professional learning communities, the literature points to the development of a collaborative culture. In order to build a collaborative culture, a system must be developed around trust. Muhammed (2018) explained that it is necessary to face the extant culture and address any toxic behaviors in order to move the organization in productively the right direction.

Sustaining a process that is in full implementation takes a commitment as explained by DuFour et. al. Again, research visits sustaining a collective commitment by maintaining a culture, a culture focused on student learning. In order to continue the PLC process momentum, the celebration of small successes needs to occur frequently through a consistent collection of evidence of student learning. Throughout the process, it is critical to periodically encourage stakeholders to revisit the reason for their actions to provide motivation to continue moving forward.

Contributions

The extant literature supports the researcher's action research project by identifying the need for a process of evidence collection as a means of documenting student learning. In addition to collecting evidence, there needs to be a process to celebrate successes within an active collaboration. The existing research supports the need to build the efficacy of principals in

addition to teachers, as the principal models the behaviors expected as part of a professional learning community and is in a position to practice distributive leadership.

Strengths

Of the literature reviewed, the recurring topic of building a strong foundation by creating a collaborative culture appeared numerous times. This frequent recurrence suggests that a collaborative culture is a necessity. However, the organization must continue to nurture the relationships.

Gap in Literature

Research on professional learning communities is extensive, and existing literature provides guidance on how to implement PLC practices and set up high-functioning collaborative teams, as well as substantiating the effective results when PLCs are implemented correctly. Nonetheless, there is a gap in the literature on how to sustain a PLC in a small rural school district when the turnover of teachers is high or when staff who have invested in the school are less experienced with systems outside of their own.

The research does address changing the culture of a school. The gap in literature becomes evident when trying to understand how to effectively undo traditions without creating a revelation. Small rural school districts often relish their local traditions, and when those traditions run deep it can prove difficult to provide professional development while seeking a change in the culture. Striking a balance facts and feelings is critical during this process, especially when the leaders involved are former students, family of school board members, or life-long friends.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The researcher used qualitative methods to triangulate findings of this action research study to create an ongoing process of adult and student learning by transforming a small rural school district into a PLC. To sustain the process, the AR team created a system of monitoring and distributing leadership. The DI team applied a system to create processes-enhancing student learning. The following research questions guided the researcher through the study:

1. How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?
3. What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

The researcher sought to understand how relational dynamics affect the research process, data, and findings to identify recommendations to inform professional practices.

Theoretical Framework

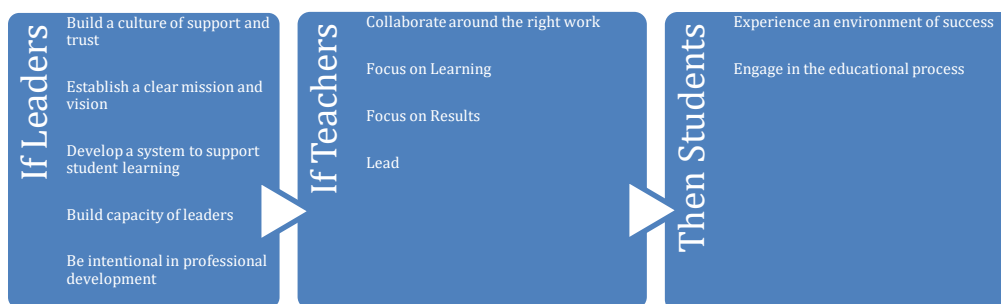
The theory of action was used to provide coherence in a logical, organized way so that the system would achieve the desired results (Every Student Succeeds Act Arkansas State Plan [ESSA], 2019). The goal was to ensure all students have access to opportunities for a high-quality education by engaging adults in a process that is timely, actionable, and continuous. The theory of action connected courses of action with desired outcomes, and clarified important

inputs in the system (i.e., resources necessary to carry out the actions theorized to achieve the goals of the system). Utilizing the theory of action systematically created an evidence-based story to explain specific actions that result in desired outcomes. Feedback from surveys, interviews, and observations shaped the theory of action. The theory of action framework outlined an ongoing process of revisiting and refining practices as data from collected evidence, plans, actions, and data checks revealed themes that informed ways to change the focus on student learning (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

If a culture of trust and support is built between leaders and teachers, collaborative teacher teams can bring their professional strengths and weaknesses. If the district, in the course of community collaboration, clearly delivers a sense of purpose and expectations, then the district operates as one for all students. If leaders distribute leadership to teachers, then teachers take ownership as explained by Hargreaves (2001). If leadership development is intentional, then teachers will have the support, leadership knowledge, and established systems necessary to improve educational outcomes for students via interventions and extensions. Figure 2 includes the stages of the theory of action.

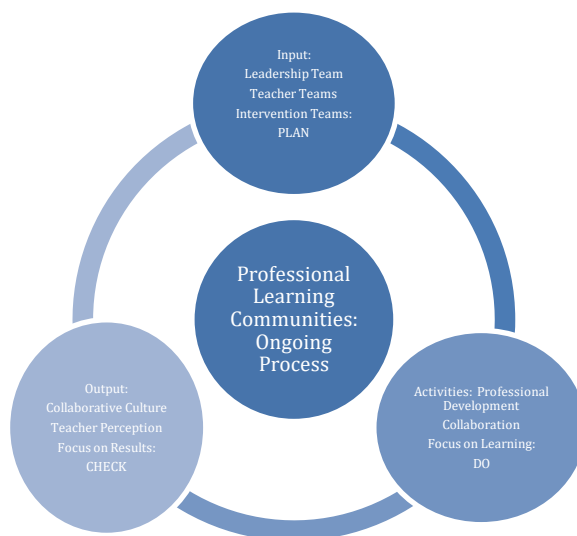
Figure 2

Theory of Action



Conceptual Framework

The core concept that fuels this action study is the development of a continuous cycle of inquiry and improvement. The leadership team planned and embedded professional learning opportunities through collaborative teams to create a culture of adult learning within daily instruction. Student learning outcomes influenced teacher reflection, which informed the professional learning opportunities where leaders provided support and time to continue to improve their instructional practices. Collaborative teacher teams planned and implemented instruction and analyzed student work to implement interventions or extensions to help students achieve mastery of a skill. The cycle continued through each of the identified priority standards. Intervention teams ensured high levels of learning for all students. The team organized foundational skill groups and grade-level essential standard groups to meet individual student needs. The intervention teams worked collaboratively with teacher teams to support student learning. They frequently monitored progress to fluidly move students in and out of groups upon mastery of various skills. The conceptual framework (Figure 3) presents the cycle of action implemented in the study.

Figure 3*Conceptual Framework***Action Research**

All staff in Daniel School District received job-embedded professional development through Solution Tree, a publishing company. During three years of funding from the state department, Solution Tree sent instructional coaches into the district to investigate the needs of students and adults in the district, create a plan of action to improve learning, and coach staff through timely and actionable steps of continuous improvement. The primary support coach visited schools once a month for two days to assist the administration team in assessing adult learning. After three years of coaching, Daniel School District became dependent upon the support of associates from Solution Tree. The action research project was an exploration of the learned behaviors that transferred into daily practices in instruction with a goal of creating a plan of sustainability without contracted instructional coaches.

The four cycles of intervention are derived from guiding questions by DuFour et al. (2016): “What is it we want our students to know and be able to do? How will we know if each

student has learned it? How will we respond when some students do not learn it? How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency” (p. 59)? The researcher modified these questions to guide the action research by incorporating the *plan, do, check* cycle into the four guiding questions. Each question addresses a cycle in the research.

Question 1: What is it we want the staff to know and be able to do? Prepare educators with professional learning and support to ensure all students learn at high levels. The administration collectively created a set of expectations within the PLC. Based on the job-embedded professional development from Solution Tree, what practices are part of the PLC process and which practices should be part of the process but are not yet common. Cycle 1 of the research brought clarity to what leadership deemed negotiable and non-negotiable. The leadership team communicated expectations through staff meetings and written communication. The AR team determined a method of providing support by submitting a system of monitoring to staff in meeting the desired expectations. This cycle provided clarity, which precedes competency (DuFour et al., 2016).

Question 2: How will we know if the staff has learned and implemented the practices of professional learning communities? The cycle 2 of the research included collecting evidence of current practices through daily instruction and collaborative teacher teams to guide the research team with regards to appropriate supports for intervening with teachers. Data analysis revealed what methods were effective, what was practiced, and which practices improved student engagement.

Question 3: How will we respond when some staff do not understand the process or are not practicing the process? Cycle 2 identified teachers who lacked clarity regarding the professional learning community process during the third cycle of the research. Those who

lacked clarity in the PLC process were identified in this cycle. The cycle included a support system to implement interventions for staff that would help them focus on student learning. The final cycle addressed how teams responded to those who understood the professional learning communities process and produced evidence of its effectiveness. This cycle created processes to increase teacher efficacy, empower teachers to build capacity of the process, and create a consistent timeline of celebrating the success of educators.

Action Research Design Team

The action research design team consisted of seven members: the superintendent, school improvement specialist, three principals, the special education director, and the researcher. The researcher was previously employed by the district and aware of the dynamics of the team. Mr. Adams, the superintendent, was raised in the small rural town of Daniel and graduated from Daniel High School. He previously served as the assistant principal of Daniel Elementary School before becoming superintendent. His leadership role in the AR team was necessary to ensure administrative support for changes to professional development practices.

Daniel Elementary School principal, Mrs. Olive, was also raised in Daniel and graduated from Daniel High School. She taught in one other district before returning to her hometown. Mr. Joseph, Daniel Junior High School principal, had only been employed in the district for two years. Prior to joining the school district, Mr. Joseph was a head football coach in a neighboring district. The high school principal, Mr. David, also served as the athletic director in the district. He was raised in Daniel and graduated from Daniel High School before returning as the head football coach. During his first two years as high school principal, Mr. David was also the head football coach and athletic director. The present study occurred during his third year as principal.

The special education director, Mrs. Noah, was new to the administrative role but brought years of experience in the district as a speech pathologist. She was on the AR team to ensure special education teachers participated in the process. The school improvement specialist, Mrs. Jacob, was new to the district but a veteran educator. She previously served in a neighboring district as superintendent. Mrs. Jacob was not working at Daniel School District during the initial professional development opportunities for professional learning communities. The researcher previously served in Mrs. Jacob's role when employed at the district.

Action Research Design Implementation Team

The DI team was represented by a teacher leader from each grade level at the elementary and junior high campuses. The high school campus' team included a teacher from each content area and the dean of students. In addition, the counselor from each campus served on the DI team. There was a total of 18 members, including the researcher. The elementary school employs 21 teachers, the junior high 22 teachers, and the high school 33 teachers. All participants indicated their willingness to be part of the study through signed consent forms.

Action Research Timeline

The researcher implemented this action research in four cycles, which overlapped. The research started in August 2020 and ended in February 2021. The cycles followed the *plan, do, check* process; each team implemented a planning phase followed by actions informed by evidence to guide the interventions. Table 1 describes the interventions implemented for educators by the research teams during this action research.

Table 1*Interventions*

Intervention	Action Research Team and Design Implementation Team Activities	Anticipated Outcomes/Connection to the Problem, Theoretical Framework	Timeline	Data Collected During the Intervention
Set clear expectations and guidelines and monitor	Weekly Collaborative Leadership Team meetings to come to a consensus on expectations Clearly communicate expectations Provide support through professional development	Clarity and understanding of expectations Staff operating as a collaborative team Building a culture of trust and support	First Cycle: August 2020 - Planning Second Cycle: September 2020 – Communicating Third Cycle: October 2020 – November 2020 - Support of expectations Fourth Cycle: December 2020 - February 2021 Collection of evidence	Communication dissemination Agendas Intentional professional development
Weekly meetings held with collaborative teacher teams	Provide a guiding agenda template for team meetings Attend collaborative teacher team meetings and offer support	Collaborative teacher teams create a systemic process of action around student learning of essential standards and respond to students based on data Time for collaborative teacher teams will be uninterrupted and focused	PLC Meetings held weekly	Agendas and notes from teachers Observation
Determine staff who need assistance with daily instructional practices	Provide coaching to staff struggling with daily instructional practices Follow up with support		Second Cycle: Collect observation data Third Cycle: November 2020 Follow up with observations and provide professional support	Observations and team data Agendas Team notes
Implement a process to build capacity through teacher leaders Celebrate successes	Identify strengths of teachers and create a system for them to conduct focused professional development as needed Intentionally celebrate	Teachers will be empowered to actively create solutions to solve student needs in a collaborative culture	Monthly during staff meetings	Observations Surveys

Research Design

The action research followed a framework that allowed for flexibility throughout the cycles of implementation. The purpose of this research was to better inform administrators to help create a culture of collaboration with a focus on learning and functioning as an effective PLC. As addressed in the literature review, leadership should be distributed to sustain an ongoing process.

The instruments of data collection included interviews and surveys. The researcher gathered teachers' perceptions of their teaching practices and transparency of the leadership at their schools. The AR team informed the direction of interventions by collecting evidence from daily instructional practices through observations. The administration team analyzed the observational data to set expectations and communicate those expectations to teachers and administrative staff.

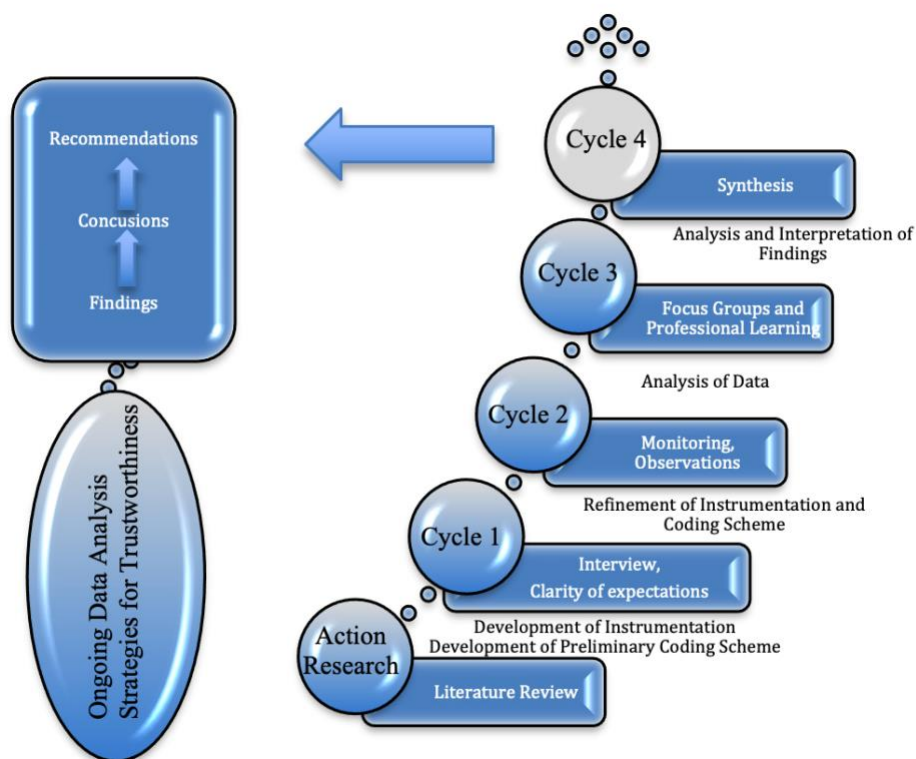
The DI team, also known as the guiding coalition, coordinated with the AR team to create a monitoring system. They discussed which teaching practices were most effectively monitored by the AR team and those most effectively monitored by the DI team based on the needs indicated by participant responses. Some team practices may need support to improve the teachers' instructional strategies, and some may require an administrator's response. Both teams collected agendas from team meetings as one source of data to inform the collaborative team processes. However, the teams focused on different aspects of the agendas to determine appropriate interventions.

Professional learning approaches reflected the needs of the collaborative teacher teams. If the agenda indicated the collaborative teams were struggling with a practice or strategy, teacher leaders would assist by providing intentional coaching sessions. If the agendas indicated barriers

in the process resulted from a *lack of will* of a team or teacher, the AR team addressed those concerns with one-on-one coaching or conversations. The observation protocols became more focused on practices and were conducted and shared by both the DI team and the AR team. The final cycle included teacher perception surveys to determine if a collaborative culture, developmental support, and clarity of expectations transformed the district into a sustainable PLC. Figure 3 shows the research design, which is based on the work of Bloomberg and Volpe (2019).

Figure 4

Research Design



Contextual Setting

The use of professional learning communities was not a novel theory of practice for Daniel School District. The small rural school district began implementing professional learning

communities two years before the action research study began. The district, including three campuses, received intense professional development to build a strong foundation of knowledge. The purpose of the action research was to use the knowledge they received to transform the district into a PLC with ongoing processes of embedded continual adult and student learning.

Daniel School District has three campuses led by three different principals. The three principals offered three different leadership styles. The action research study addressed leadership roles, collaboration, monitoring systems, and the distribution of leadership to build the capacity of professional learning communities in order to improve professional learning practices and sustain the professional development process.

Selection

Building the research team was a process of natural selection of those who could drive change, make decisions, and create a new learning culture. The team started with a smaller AR team of seven members, including all administrators in the district and the researcher. The AR team worked collaboratively with the DI team. The DI team included teacher-leaders from each campus and content area to represent each of the collaborative teams. The researcher chose the teacher-leaders based on their history of positive influence with colleagues, while also soliciting input from administrators within their collaborative team and campus. The researcher worked directly with the superintendent to establish timelines and implementation so clarity of expectations as a PLC would be delivered and supported by the leaders of the district. The leaders of the district recognized that they must know and clearly articulate their goals if they expect others to support them (Pont et al., 2008).

Data Collection Methods

For this study, the researcher collected data from observations, interviews, surveys, discussions, and documents resulting in qualitative data. Observations revealed daily instructional practices and how they evolved over the course of the implementation of the action research. The AR team discussed the protocol of the observation to calibrate the data collected. The AR team decided the number of observations and determined the focused practice to collect data. The observation protocol evolved as the AR team collected evidence (see Appendix B). The findings were uploaded to a shared electronic file.

Pre- and post-research interviews provided the researcher with insight from teachers and administrators. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that a major benefit of collecting data through individual, in-depth interviews is the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience. Interview questions were designed to gather an understanding of daily instructional practices, the impact of professional learning communities, and what teachers learned from participating in a collaborative learning team in the district.

The researcher used surveys to gather data regarding teachers' perceptions of the cycles and their participation in the process. Surveys included questions that elicited responses regarding the following themes. How do teachers feel about the ways they are informed about student learning? Do teachers feel they are part of the process of determining instruction? Do they feel they are acting under direction of those leading or do they feel empowered to make professional decisions on their own? Surveys helped the researcher determine the perceptions of teachers. Multiple perspectives allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complexity of change in culture.

The AR and DI teams compiled agendas and analyzed them to determine whether they focused on student learning. The agendas told the story of how collaborative teams responded to student learning. The agendas also documented the practices developed into processes. The minutes from the agendas provided evidence of the collective team's response to the monitoring of learning. The researcher collected common formative assessment data and created a plan of action for teacher teams to respond to students who did not learn the standard and those who did. In addition, data collected from the assessments indicated the successes and failures of daily instructional practice.

The triangulation of data sources permitted the researcher to compile evidence to inform the actions of the study. Based on the literature review, the culture of the organization created trust and built collaboration. This was the foundation of a PLC.

Data Analysis

Four cyclical components were designed to drive the action research. These cycles sometimes ran simultaneously, depending on the needs of the participants. Within each cycle, another cycle was embedded (ESSA, 2019). The researcher conducted individual interviews and focus groups with teachers from various grade levels, content areas, and experience levels; principals; and support staff. These interviews provided input from staff at each school. The interviews were analyzed by extrapolating phrases to find common perceptions among teachers. The guiding questions appear in Table 1; probes were also developed (Appendix E).

Table 2

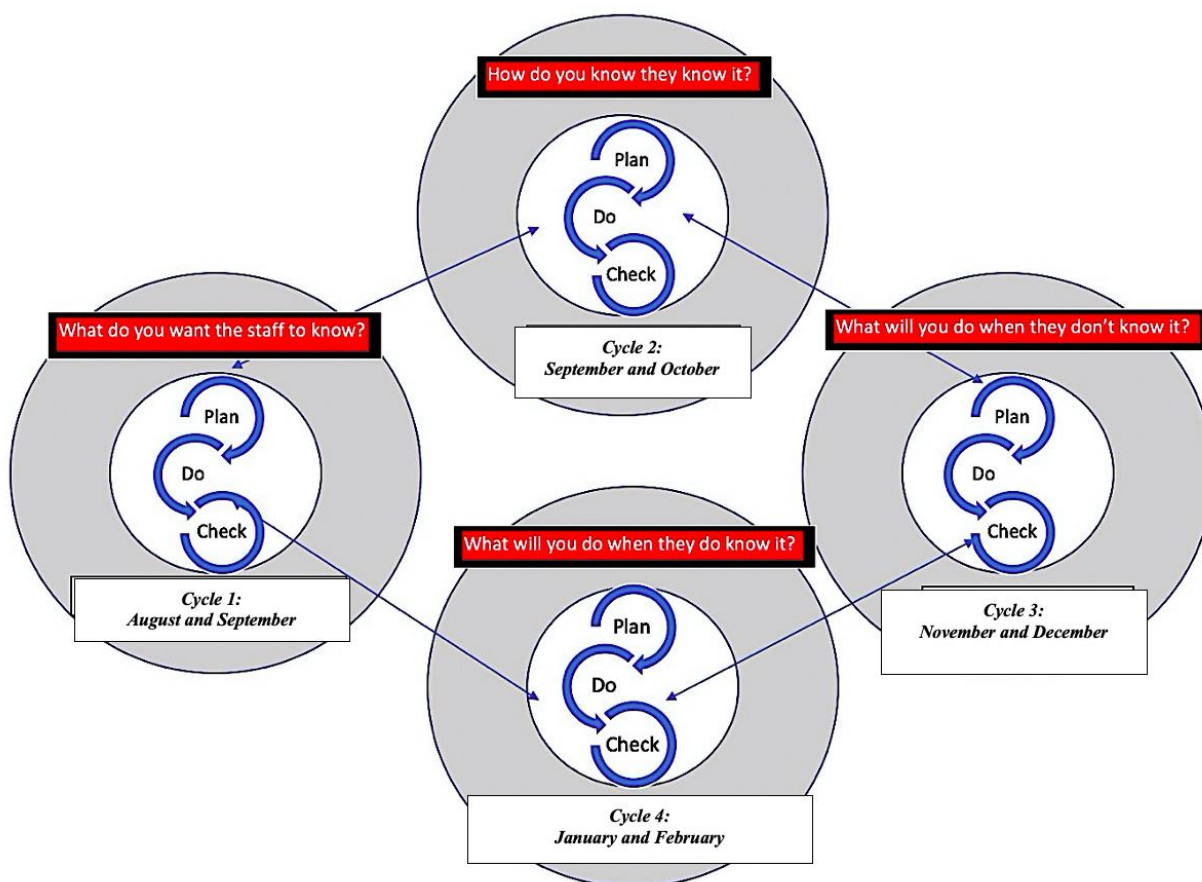
Pre-research Interview Protocol

Question #1	Can you tell us what kind of teacher you are? Think of age, subject, and experience.
Question #2	What are your expectations in participating in the PLC?

Question #3	What are your motives for participating in the PLC?
Question #4	How would you describe the learning culture and atmosphere in the PLC?
Question #5	To what extent do you experience possibilities in the PLC for your professional development?
Question #6	To what extent do you experience possibilities in the school for your professional development and for school improvement?
Question #7	What are some significant differences between the possibilities in the PLC and in the school?
Question #8	What are you confronted with when trying to change or improve practices in your school?

The AR team administered observation protocols to assess teachers' actions in their daily instruction during the first cycle of the research. The observation protocol continued in each cycle. The DI team gauged the staff in the transparency of the leadership team. In addition to collecting surveys, the DI team collected the agendas of the collaborative team meetings. The agendas informed the practices of the team, and the observation protocols informed the practices of the individual teachers in the classroom to lead to a cycle of continuous improvement.

The researcher selected the "Teacher Survey for Gauging Transparency" (Lang, 2018) to investigate differences in leadership style and how they affect staff. Daniel School District received the same professional development via professional learning communities at each campus. However, the leadership style at each campus was different. Does the leadership style influence institutional change; does professional development influence change; does building teacher efficacy influence change? What balance between each component is necessary to create and sustain change? Figure 4 shows the stages of the action research cycle.

Figure 5*Action Research Cycle*

This action research study involved the use of qualitative methods to develop an understanding of teacher perceptions through interviews and surveys, framing practices through a collection of agendas and observations. The researcher collected qualitative data from surveys, interviews, and observations. Perception surveys, gauging the transparency of the leaders, were collected from all staff members and guided the AR team in determining communication plans to meet the needs that teachers identified (see Appendix C). Pre- and post-interview questions explored the state of the PLC and the impact it made in a small rural school district. The AR team and DI team used the qualitative data to create a plan for focused and intentional professional development. Observation protocols informed teams of teachers' daily instructional

practices. Teams collaborated, but the collaboration was ineffective if not transferred to daily instruction.

The observation protocols strengthened the qualitative analysis. Leaders and staff collected evidence of the number of teachers who communicated their learning targets to students. In turn, the research team collected evidence at the end of lessons to determine whether students could clearly articulate the learning objective. This provided another layer of clarity of expectations for teachers and students.

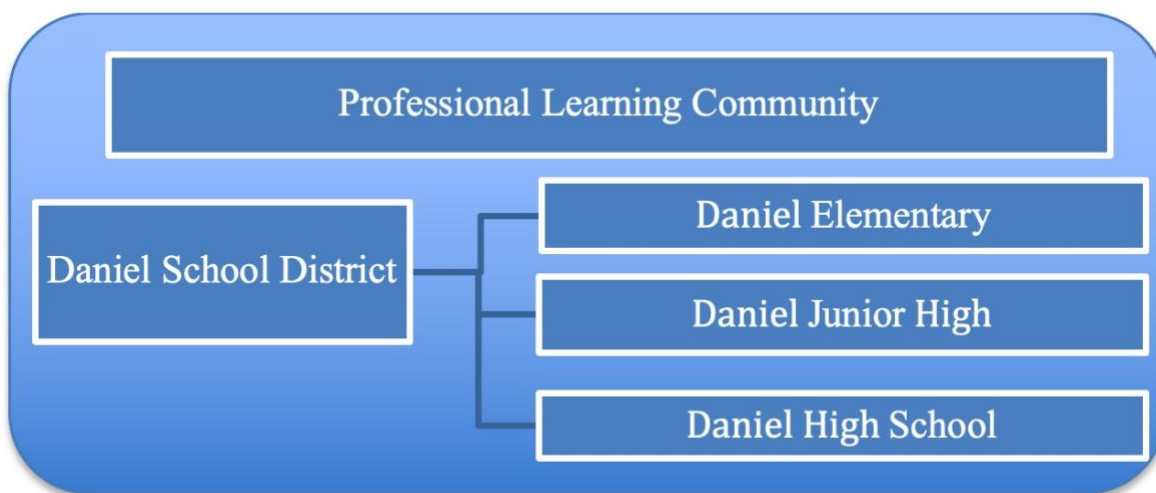
As the collaborative district professional learning community model was built, the researcher determined the level of engagement in the process through team agendas. The agendas outlined the roles of the teams, and documented plans of continuous improvement. The AR and DI teams followed instructional practices through the agenda notes. Change requires confronting facts, which requires a culture of trust. To collect valid data, the researcher must establish trust. The researcher conducted a staff meeting to assure participants of the confidentiality of data collection and discussion of the results of the study. The action research project provided a platform to participate in change. As a participant of the research, educators were empowered to participate in and understand the need for change based on actual data. Transparency of the facts collected provided justification of change and built trust. Facts improved a sense of trust; however, feelings provided a barrier. Emotional responses from teachers arose in the discrepancy of implementation of PLCs from campus to campus. Teachers voiced that leader expectations were not consistent. This provided insight into the study and was supported by research about the importance of bringing clarity to the process.

Case Study

In this action research, the researcher conducted a study of one small rural school district with three campuses. Each of the campuses received the same professional development. However, the campuses progressed at different rates. The researcher examined the similarities and differences between each campus to understand what actions affect adult learning. The schools shared the same community, the same professional development, and the same sense of school pride. What variables beyond the ages of children make the greatest difference? The intervention included four cycles of action research, providing a comprehensive understanding of each part of the system (see Figure 5).

Figure 6

System of Action Research Subject



Validity and Trustworthiness

This action research included the compilation of data from multiple sources and investigators to determine if the learning practice was appropriately focused. The triangulation of data sources and investigators increased the validity of the findings. Creswell and Miller (2000)

add that triangulation, a validity procedure, is a process of sorting and coding data through the researcher's lens that looks for commonalities and eliminates overlapping areas. The researcher stored all data on an electronic file for participants to view, providing a transparency to the research. The electronic file was an additional resource to support member checking (i.e., allowing participants to validate the findings and increase the trustworthiness of the study).

Subjectivity Statement

Daniel School District is no longer my employer anymore, but I was invested in their progress as a professional learning community. I oversee professional learning communities at 44 schools in districts throughout the state, and provide support for other divisions, districts, and schools seeking to operate as professional learning communities. I have experienced the impact that the process can have, if implemented appropriately.

This is my 28th year as an educator. However, I was not introduced to a professional learning community until I served as an elementary school principal in Texas. I experienced success and the school was nationally recognized as a Blue-Ribbon school by the United States Department of Education in 2009. However, I recognized that the district was located in an area that had an abundant selection of educators, which created a competitive employment situation and an even greater parental support system. These advantages accelerated and simplified the process. Daniel School District did not have the same advantages, making their journey to become a professional learning community more challenging.

In 2015, our family moved to another state and I began work as a high school principal in Daniel School District, later moving to a district position as the School Improvement Specialist. While serving in the latter position, I wrote a grant for the district to participate in a pilot project with the state department that resulted in three years of intensive job-embedded coaching. After

two years of training, the state department recruited me to lead the project statewide and prepare a sustainability plan to continue the work. The state department afforded me the opportunity to observe many schools in high-functioning and low-functioning professional learning communities. Due to my experience in professional learning communities, I must be consciously aware of how I might affect the research process. Decisions, actions, and implementations need to occur organically as a team in order to increase the efficacy of leaders and teachers as they move to a more sustainable learning process.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on the framework and design of the action research and the methods of data collection. The purpose of the action research was to transform a school district into a self-sustaining professional learning community. The theory of action framed the study; the researcher analyzed actions that ultimately led to desired results. The conceptual framework provided a foundation for the study to develop a continuous cycle of improvement.

Triangulation of qualitative data helped confirm the findings of the study. As determined through the literature review, perceptions drive a culture (Muhammad, 2019). Therefore, the researcher used interviews and surveys to gather participants' perceptions. The researcher also used observations and agendas to collect evidence regarding discussions and processes that occurred in collaborative teacher team meetings as they transferred conceptual goals into daily instructional practices. Finally, the monitoring of practices by the AR team and the DI team added to the data to determine the most effective interventions.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE

The Context

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the practices that could be implemented in an ongoing process of professional learning communities to create a continuous cycle of improvement for student and adult learning. The AR team, comprised of the superintendent, campus principals, and district leaders, and the DI team, which included teacher leaders, both used the following research questions to guide their actions:

1. How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?
3. What is learned by members of the action research team as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

Problem Framing in the Context

Comprised of three campuses, Daniel School District is home to an elementary, junior high, and high school. Two larger cities are within a 60-mile radius, and, of the two school districts in the county, Daniel is the larger district. The district stands as one of the top three employers in the county and maintains a staff of 125 people.

Daniel School District is a small system, serving 980 students from Kindergarten through 12th grade, and its district is a rural region characterized by high rates of poverty and low rates

of academic performance. The population is 53% White, 39% African American, 6% Hispanic/Latino 1% Asian, and 1% Native American (Figure 7). Over 75% of the student body qualifies for free and reduced lunch, and the student-to-teacher ratio is 15:1. The state accountability system labeled the district with a letter grade of “D.”

Figure 7

Daniel School District Race/Ethnicity Statistics

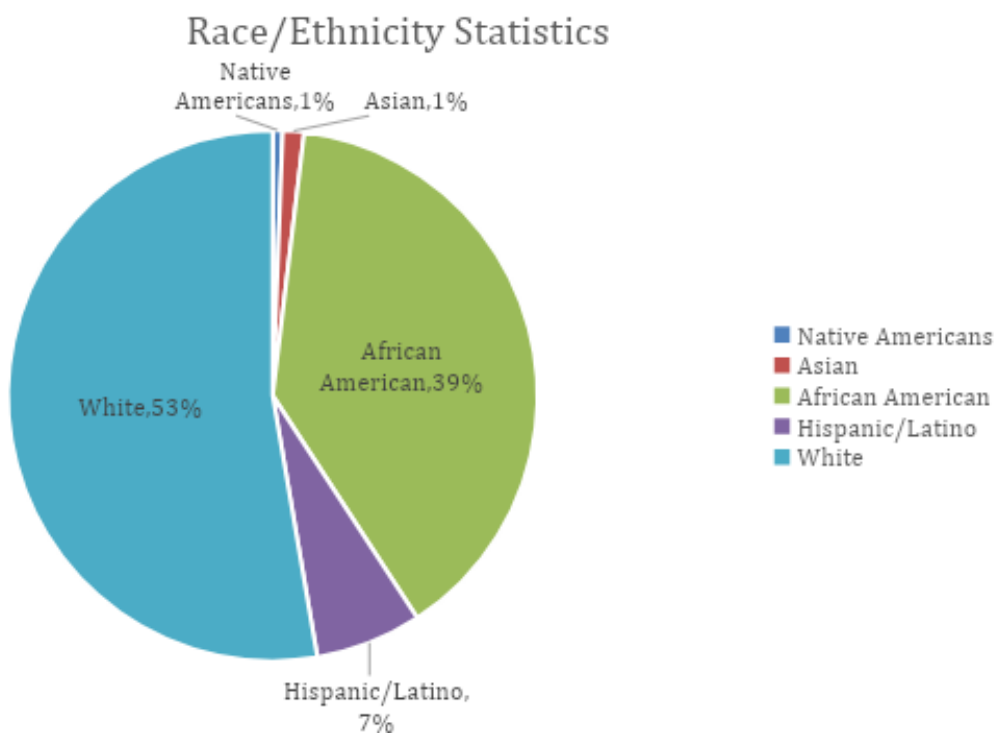


Table 3*Characteristics of the Daniel School District*

Additional Characteristics of the Daniel School District:	
English Language Learners:	3%
Economically Disadvantaged:	76%
Students eligible to receive special education:	12%
Average teacher ratio:	13:1
Graduation rate:	93%

Problem-framing Based on the Site

One reason for the challenges facing the Daniel School District was the absence of clear, coherent expectations for teachers from leaders. The teachers had received many hours of professional development regarding PLCs. However, the expectations for how to implement that knowledge were missing, as was clear communication of those expectations by leaders. This AR study focused on providing clarity, communication, collaboration expectations through a shared monitoring system. The system focused on products of actions to create a plan to address the needs of teachers and students. From a small rural school district that operated in isolation and compliance, the system had to rely on relational interactions to ensure that the system did not become simply another compliance measure. The district monitoring system was intended to create an ongoing process of monitoring student learning on a timely basis.

Daniel is a small rural town in the southern United States. The town has a declining population, and Daniel School District serves as one of the largest employers of the community. The superintendent and school board members were fully aware of the critical need for change in the district, but they were unsure of how to establish the mission and purpose. Their unfocused push for change led to several unsustainable innovative attempts. For instance, the high school

campus adopted flex scheduling as well as introduced virtual classes and advisory periods to serve as mentoring periods. The elementary school functioned as a “community” where students travel through elementary to fourth grade with the same class of students in which they started kindergarten. In each August of previous years, elementary students had begun school with a new teacher and class of students. In the new model, students were allowed to start school with one class of students in kindergarten and travel with that same class until fourth grade. Between the high school trials and elementary trails, the district was open to innovative thinking and change. However, all the innovations were structural changes with a hope of changing academics, yet none of those innovation focused specifically on academics. In the wake of these innovations, a mere 30% of Daniel School District students met or exceeded standards on the state-mandated ACT Aspire literacy assessment. The district was performing below the majority of the schools located within the region on achievement (Figure 8) and fell slightly below the trendline when compared with other districts in the state. Daniel School District also exhibited a decrease in proficiency (Figure 9). Combined with low achievement scores and high numbers of economically disadvantaged students, Daniel School District could no longer afford to work in isolation or with the same practices. Current professional development practices have been shown ineffective as the achievement gap continued to grow. In order to achieve the desired outcomes, the district leaders knew they would be required to address the districts’ history of operating within an established culture of isolation.

After tenure as the high school principal, the researcher moved to the district level as the school improvement specialist, and then later to the state level as the director of special projects, which afforded the researcher the opportunity to partner with Daniel School District on a different level. The researcher continued to lead professional learning communities for districts

throughout the state that were involved in the same state-initiated project that Daniel School District was involved with three years earlier. This change in employment still offered the opportunity for the researcher to work with Daniel School District as well as 44 other districts in the project.

Figure 8

Districts Located within the Same Region of the Daniel School District

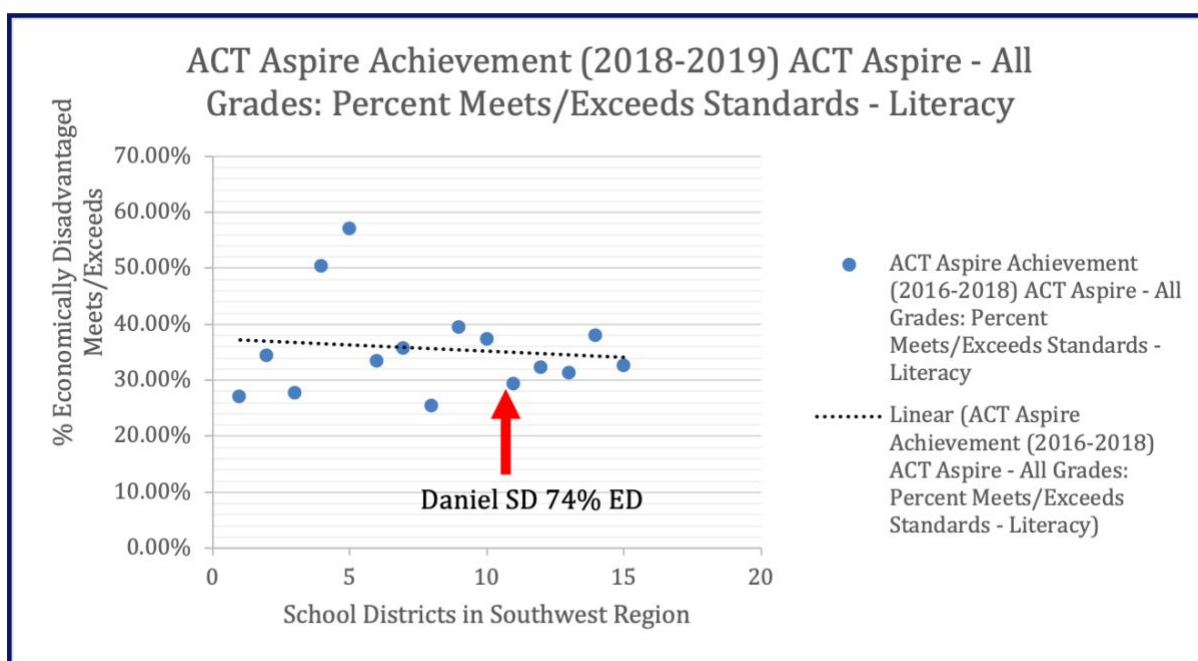
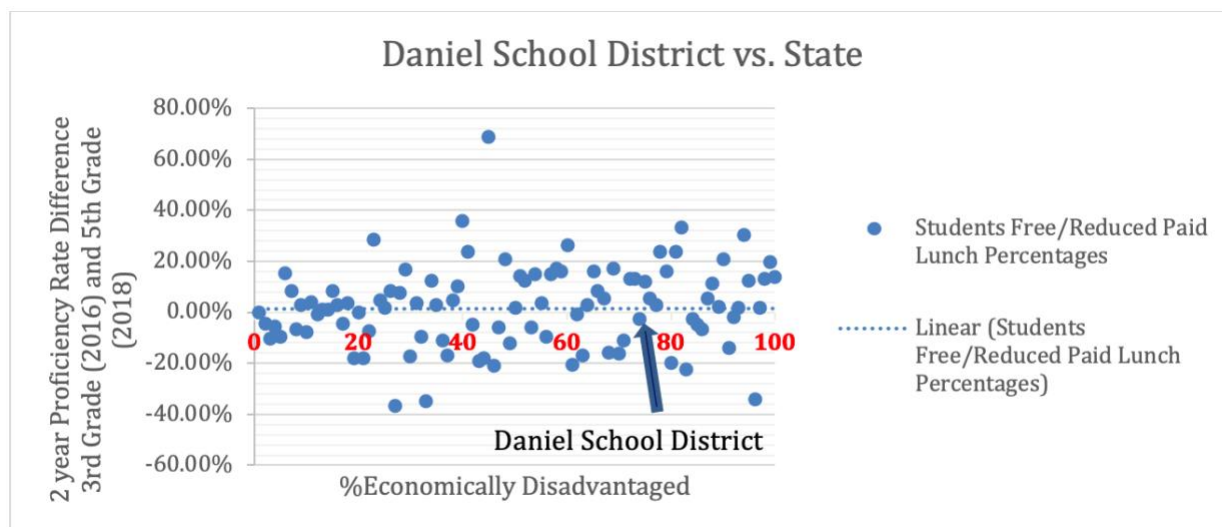


Figure 9*2-Year Proficiency Rate Difference*

The State Department of Education implemented a pilot project that would create a support system to assist local education agencies in improving student learning. Daniel School District was chosen as one of the pilot schools and accordingly received three years of intensive support from outside consultants who were contracted to be physically present in the district for approximately 50 days out of the school year. After year three, the pilot schools were challenged to sustain the process without the supplemental support of outside consultants. It was after the three-year state pilot that the researcher began the action research study to determine what factors were involved in sustaining the PLC implementation and which components would be needed to create an ongoing process focused on student learning.

The Story and Outcomes

The three Daniel School district campuses received intensive professional development for three years on the processes of professional learning communities. The three-year

commitment to the state project ended at the conclusion of the 2019–2020 school year. The three campuses were in very different developmental levels of sustainability.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic began. District schools closed their doors on March 13 and were forced to pivot to virtual instruction, leaving students, educators, and administrators unsure of what the future of learning would look like. In August of 2020, Daniel School District opened their doors to onsite instruction and also offered virtual instruction; the district implemented a blended model, tried a hybrid model, and pivoted upon a moment's notice each time that staff or students tested positive for COVID-19. As a result of the inconsistency of the delivery of instruction, the community's attention adversely shifted away from a focus on learning and to a focus on teaching. Frequently, teachers would video lessons to create a bank of instructions for students to address during the next, eventual pivot. The staff, the students, and the community more broadly were experiencing an education rollercoaster of and had to prioritize among tough, constantly fluctuating demands.

The researcher was employed at Daniel School District during the professional learning community pilot project offered by the state. However, prior to the AR study, the researcher changed employment from the district to the state but continued to focus on PLCs from the state level. Accordingly, when forming the AR and DI teams at the outset of this action research project, the researcher was able to travel to the district to meet with the teams and to otherwise meet through Zoom. The AR team and the DI team were formed in August 2020 and signed consent to participate in the research study. Given the pandemic, the initial research timeline became more flexible and was ultimately extended, making data collection more difficult but not impossible. Meetings were consistently rescheduled based pandemic-related logistics.

The research occurred in four cycles (Figure 4). The dates of the cycles are the dates during which the cycles were implemented. Each cycle continued as the next cycle began, thereby creating the ongoing PLC process. The continuous cycle of improvement was driven by DuFour's (1995) four guiding questions.

Cycle 1: What do you want the team to know?

The first AR cycle of collected evidence of the district's current situation with regards to implementing PLC practices. In addition, the AR team assessed the staff to gain a better understanding of the culture. The first meeting, which occurred on August 7, 2020, centered on discussion of the purpose and plans of the action research. The team signed a consent form and were informed of the steps taken to ensure confidentiality. The team was amenable to the challenge of collecting and reviewing data in order to develop an implementation plan.

In August and September of 2020, the researcher conducted interviews with 12 participants to gain an understanding of expectations and perceptions. The interviews continued into cycle two of the study. All the interview participants served on either the DI team or the AR team. Three staff members from each of the three campuses served as interviewees, as did three persons from district administration. The research questions were designed to solicit participants' perceptions of the district's current culture, the PLC process, and possible barriers in the progression of professional learning communities. The information gathered during these interviews was then presented to the AR team for implementation in the planning of next steps.

In September 2020, the researcher met with the AR team to develop a consensus regarding what parts of the PLC process the leadership team considered negotiable or non-negotiable. The team discussed practices to determine which issues should be at the discretion of the classroom professional and which should be monitored as a policy expectation.

The AR team agreed that each campus would hold the same expectations for their collaborative teams in presenting and following project norms, common formative assessments with disaggregated data, and weekly agendas. These practices were monitored by the action research team and the design implementation team through observations and team agendas that were uploaded to the shared drive.

Collaborative teams decided how their pacing guides were to be used, but the AR team did not feel the pacing guides should be posted or monitored as a district. The elementary school representative, unlike the junior high and high school representatives, expressed that pacing guides were a non-negotiable at the elementary school campus and accordingly would be monitored. The final district decision resulted in the practice being designated a negotiable, leaving the elementary to monitor it through the campus level guiding coalition.

Unit plans were determined to be necessary by all representatives of the action research team. Therefore, the district mandated that unit plans be submitted and uploaded regularly through a shared drive. Accordingly, the unit plans were posted at regular intervals and monitored by the district leadership team. The pacing of each unit dictated the posting of the upcoming unit. Lesson plans were not required to be written or submitted. Additional components of the monitoring system included common formative assessments, which were to be notated throughout the unit plan and designed or decided upon through collaboration. The assessments, along with the disaggregated data, were determined to be uploaded in the shared drive and monitored by the leadership team. Essential standards had to be uploaded and shared for transparency. The collection of uploaded documents was monitored by the design implementation team and the action research team to determine appropriate interventions.

Finally, the AR team devised a communication plan to provide the staff with clarity regarding monitored expectations. In a staff meeting on September 23, 2020, the superintendent held a districtwide staff meeting to discuss his support for the teachers' decisions, and he turned the meeting over to the school improvement specialist to outline the expectations and monitoring plan. For sustainability, the superintendent did not refer to the monitoring teams as the AR and DI teams. In Table 4, the AR team is the "leadership team" and the DI team is the "guiding coalition."

Table 4*Monitoring Timeline*

Activity	Monitor	Monitoring Frequency
Weekly Meetings	Leadership Team	Weekly
Norms	Collaborative Teacher Teams	Semester
Weekly Agendas	Guiding Coalition/ Leadership Team	Weekly
Essential Standards	Guiding Coalition	Monthly
Common Formative Assessments	Guiding Coalition	Monthly
Unit Plans	Leadership Team/Guiding Coalition	Monthly
Data	Leadership Team/Guiding Coalition	Monthly

Cycle 1 provided clarity with regards to the professional learning community's expectations for the leadership team, ensuring that staff were informed as to what those expectations entailed. In addition, a monitoring system was created to inform educational practices. Cycle 1 started the process and will continue as part of a system of monitoring and support.

Cycle 2: How do we know the staff knows it?

The monitoring system created in cycle 1 generated a plan of action for cycle 2. The AR team met with the DI team to further define the monitoring and identify indicators within products in need of additional support. The team then used the indicators to decide which level of support was appropriate and who was responsible for delivering that support. When reviewing the products, the DI team concluded that a participant would not be assigned their grade level or

content team to review allowing an additional feedback outside of their collaborative teacher team.

The AR team ensured that adequate time and appropriate structures were in place to enable weekly meetings. The team monitored the meetings by either attending the meeting or reviewing the submitted evidence via a cloud drive. Occasionally, the AR team allowed the collaborative teams forgo meetings so they could instead respond to students' virtual learning by preparing recorded videos, which had been necessitated by the global pandemic. Consequently, the haphazard meeting times affected other identified non-negotiable practices in the PLC process, such as agendas and unit plans.

The DI teams reviewed the shared drives on a monthly basis in order to pinpoint the essential standards which had been identified for each subject area. Those essential standards were discussed and then vertically aligned. At the first monitoring, six teams did not upload essential standards. The DI team representatives for each team took the concern back their teams and solved it immediately. The discussions enabled team members to examine products uploaded by other teams, develop a clearer understanding of expectations, and then transmit that information back to the team. By providing easy access to the documents, vertical teams could view prompt discussions around alignment.

Cycle 2 also included a component in which the AR team conducted observations of classroom teachers with a strict focus on instructional practices. The AR team made its first observation when the team developed an understanding of whether or not posting a given learning target made any difference in students' understanding of expectations. Collaborative teacher team identified learning targets by unpacking the essential standards. The AR team focused observations on whether teachers had clearly articulated their expectations to the

students or posted them for students' understanding. Each member of the AR team completed ten observations to collect data. The team entered the classroom and documented whether the learning target was displayed for students to read. They asked two students from each observed class if they could explain the learning objective for that class session. The data that teams gathered during this process informed them as to whether posting the learning target for students was an effective daily instructional practice.

Cycle 2 expanded the capacity of monitoring PLC practices to include the AR team and the DI team. Cycle 2 developed trends in the collection of data to understand interventions needed.

Cycle 3: How will we respond if the staff doesn't know the PLC practices of the process?

As cycle 3 began, cycles 1 and 2 were continued in order to provide clarity and to monitor the work of collaborative teams. This ongoing monitoring provided the information necessary to respond to any teams needing additional support or additional professional development. Cycle 3 provoked various emotions in teachers. Many conveyed that they felt their autonomy was being removed. Conversations about how to approach adult intervention by peers and administrators offered assurance for promoting professional growth and alleviated participant's fears evaluation and scrutiny. As cycle 3 continued, support actions helped trust to develop. It is important to note, leaders had to consistently revisit the purpose of the actions to improve student learning so they, too, would not revert to a focus on teaching instead of learning.

Cycle 4: How will we respond if the staff knows and effectively implements PLC practices of the process?

Cycle 4 was launched as an extension of cycle 3, and meanwhile cycles 1 and 2 were continued. The researcher designed cycle 4 for the AR team and the DI team to focus on creating

sustainability in their PLC processes. DuFour and DuFour (2012) discussed “sustaining school improvement by examining the three key initiatives: plan for short-term wins, persevere, and build capacity of people throughout the school to contribute to the leadership of the professional learning communities process” (p. 81). Accordingly, cycle 4 included celebrations and building capacity by maximizing resources within the district.

Daniel School District finished a three-year project with the state that included intense coaching from successful education practitioners from across the country. The district was equipped with professional knowledge, and teachers demonstrated pockets of success. As collaborative teacher teams shared data and pursued transparency, the success of students and professionals grew more apparent. The AR team and DI team leveraged community talents from across the district to provide targeted professional learning. As the teams identified needs through their monitoring work in cycle 1 and 2, they connected professionals within the district to support.

Additionally, the teams intentionally looked for short-term wins that they could celebrate in order to cement community ties. The AR team allotted time once a week during staff meetings to celebrate. They celebrated both student and adult success, such as a student who met their learning goal, a collaborative teacher team that reached mastery of a standard, and or discipline improving for a grade level.

Interviews

The researcher conducted interviews with members from both the AR team and the DI team while ensuring that each campus was equally represented. Guiding questions were used in order to prompt the interviewees to engage in conversation (Table 5). Twelve interviews were performed prior to beginning the action research. Those initial interviews served to gauge

perceptions of district culture and to determine which practices were transferred from the state pilot project. Later, the twelve initial interviewees were again interviewed at the conclusion of the research in order to see if perceptions and practices had changed with the applied system of monitoring and support. The interviews questions were structured to guide discussions (Appendix E).

Table 5

Research Interview Protocol

Research Questions	Guiding Questions
1. How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?	1. Can you tell us what kind of teacher you are? Think of age, subject, and experience.
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?	2. What are your expectations in participating in the PLC? RQ 1, 2 and 3
3. What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?	3. What are your motives for participating in the PLC? RQ 1 and 2
	4. How would you describe the learning culture and atmosphere in the PLC? RQ 3
	5. To what extent do you experience possibilities in the PLC for your professional development? RQ 1 and 2
	6. To what extent do you experience possibilities in the school for your professional development and for school improvement? RQ 2
	7. What are some significant differences between the possibilities in the PLC and in the school? RQ 1, 2, and 3
	8. What are you confronted with when trying to change or improve practices in your school? RQ2

In addition, the principals and the superintendent were interviewed prior to the study in August, during the study in October, and at the conclusion of the study in January. The interviews were conducted to glean participants' perspectives on the process and to understand if and how their leadership roles had evolved.

Focus Group

Daniel Elementary, Daniel Junior High, and Daniel High School are the three campuses that make up Daniel School District. The researcher met with one focus group from each of the three schools. The focus group on each campus was a collaborative teacher team chosen from the DI team. These focus groups deliberately excluded administrators to provide an open dialogue for the collective views from the groups to be discussed. The goal of these focus groups was to understand why campuses were progressing at a different pace in the professional learning communities. Kreuger and Allen (2015) provided guidance on doing research with a focus group. Using that guidance, the researcher looked for a theme between the discussions with the three focus groups. There were inconsistencies across the district in expectations of PLCs. The lack of clarity caused frustration as recorded through the discussions.

Researcher Notes of Participant Observations

Observations were conducted by the researcher, the AR team, and the DI team. The observations collected data on instructional practices and student learning. The observation notes were used to foster professional development, support individual teachers and teams, and to utilize models of effective practices as cycles evolved.

Action Research Team Artifacts

Collaborative team agendas were collected and analyzed by the AR team and the DI team as part of a system for monitoring of ongoing processes. Each team specifically searched for

evidence of practices. Those practices informed the teams of useful steps to design job-embedded professional development and celebrate successes.

Researcher Journal Notes

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), a researcher's journaling preserves reasoning and thinking to spell out the development of the study. The researcher kept a written journal to record observations and timelines of the study with the AR and DI teams. In addition, the researcher joined collaborative teacher teams to observe the process and inform teams as to determine whether changes or clarification should be made to create a recurring cycle of continuous improvement.

Chapter Summary

The researcher identified the problem framed through the context in Chapter 4. Chapter 2 presents a literature review which suggests that creating a district culture, clarifying expectations, and building capacity are the core building blocks of sustainability. Daniel School District received intense training around PLC processes, but practices were not fully implemented to impact daily instruction. The researcher designed this action research study in response to the gap suggested by the literature review in order to create a support system for fostering sustainability.

The AR team was comprised of district administrators, and the DI team included teacher leaders. The researcher implemented four cycles of research to gather evidence regarding actions and implement processes to improve or share effective strategies, as well as to build capacity. Data were gathered from interviews, observations, artifacts, and journaling. Chapter 5 frames the findings to reveal common themes.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Introduction

This action research was designed to transform a small rural school district into a professional learning community by understanding current practices to support and create a system of effective ongoing processes. Daniel School District was equipped with the foundational knowledge of professional learning communities through extensive professional development. The AR team investigated the perceptions and practices of teachers to establish a system of mutual accountability where the subsequent information is used to make modifications.

The DI team shared ownership of systematic change through additional monitoring and by responding with intentional professional learning. In addition, the AR team addressed the gap in literature through the DI team, by building capacity among the teacher leaders and addressing their perceptions. The findings echo Bezzina's (2006) observation that "the message is unequivocal: sustaining the impact of improvement requires the leadership capability of many rather than a few" (p. 164).

This action research sought an answer to the following three questions:

- RQ1: How does the implementation of a professional learning community in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
- RQ2: How do members of a district-wide AR team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?

- RQ3: What do members of the AR team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

Data Collection Connected to Research Questions

Multiple sources of data were collected to determine findings for each research question. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the research was conducted over the course of four overlapping cycles what built upon one another. The researcher tracked RQ1 in cycle 1 and cycle 3 through interviews, observations, and agendas. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted and analyzed by the researcher for common phrases and themes. The ensuing information guided the AR team to provide further clarity on expectations. The AR team's observations occurred with an intentional focus on common practices and allowed the AR team to support teachers in their professional growth. The agendas provided insight as to where teams were in the ongoing PLC process.

The researcher used pre- and post- interview questions and teacher surveys to gather teacher perceptions that would provide data to address RQ2. The results were analyzed to identify predominant themes describing the impact of professional learning communities in the district. The researcher, along with the DI team, conducted a survey to gauge teachers' perceptions of leadership transparency. This process guided recommendations on removing barriers to improve collaboration.

Teacher teams submitted weekly agendas, and data from the agendas were gathered by the DI team to respond to RQ3. The information collected therein in turn validated the progress and informed the research teams of the next steps needed to support teacher growth and ultimately improve student achievement. As the district created a systematic approach with professional learning communities, the post-interviews helped the AR team determine which

practices were effective or ineffective in the process. The common themes resulted which from this research cycle are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Themes by Research Questions

Q1: How does the implementation of collaborative teams in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?	
Theme 1: Prioritizing standards with a collaborative team clarifies the expectations of daily instruction.	Theme 2: Reporting evidence of student learning in a shared drive impacts daily instruction.
Q2: How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?	
Theme 1: Collaboration with teams is credited with improving the moral of the district.	Theme 2: A sense of urgency in responding to student learning is increased through monitoring.
Q3: What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning team?	
Theme 1: Campus leadership drives the success of professional learning communities.	Theme 2: Giving teachers a voice empowers them to have ownership in the process and lead others.

Research Question 1: How does the implementation of PLCs in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?

Team time and structures were provided by administrators for teachers to collaborate around results to promote continuous improvement. The researcher evaluated qualitative data from interviews and observations with teachers and administrators to find common themes and determine if implementation of the PLC process impacted daily instruction. Two themes are evident in the results:

- Theme 1: Prioritizing standards with a collaborative team clarifies the expectations of daily instruction.
- Theme 2: Reporting evidence of student learning in a shared drive impacts daily instruction.

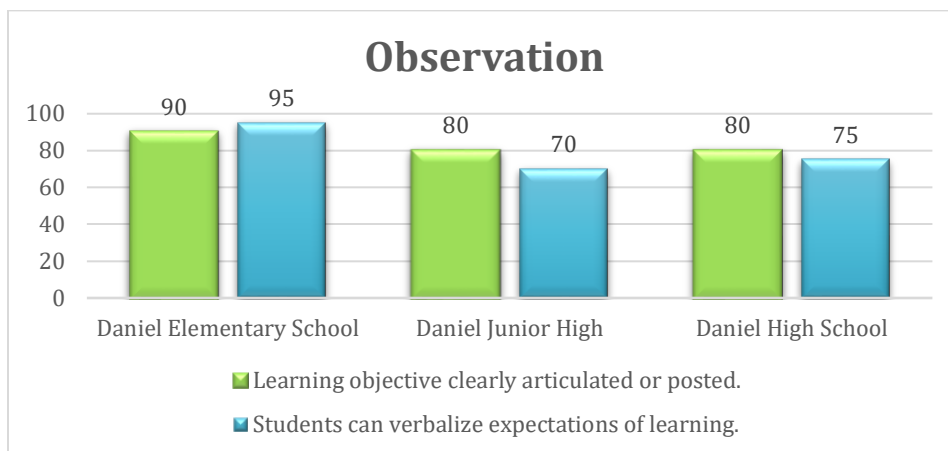
Theme 1: Prioritizing standards with a collaborative team clarifies the expectations of daily instruction. Before engaging in the design thinking sessions, the AR team conducted observations to gain an understanding of practices in the classrooms. Two administrators required teachers to post learning objectives in the classroom. One administrator shared: “I do not believe learning objectives should be posted. It is a formality that is more for an evaluator than for the students.” Another administrator agreed that the practice was completed for compliance. Two other administrators believed the practice was effective. They pointed out: “Teachers collectively decided on learning targets with their teams to provide clarity for not only the teacher but for the student.” They also added: “Teachers collectively decided on learning targets with their teams to provide clarity for not only the teacher but for the student.”

To further understand the practice, administrators documented how teachers communicated expectations. Each administrator conducted ten observations. The results of those observations are presented in Figure 10. The AR team questioned two students from each class it observed to have the students explain what they were learning. The discussion with students was used to help determine if the practice of posting class learning objectives was communicated to students, or if they were expected to simply comply with an expectation. Therefore, the administrators randomly questioned two students from each class for a total of twenty students to share their understanding of the learning expectation. The correlation between student response

and communication of the learning target indicated that clarity of objectives transferred into students' clarity of expectations.

Figure 10

Focused Classroom Observations



While the observations provided insight into the correlation between the establishment of clear expectations and student understanding of those expectations, teachers' interviews indicated the same theme as well. Mrs. Rawls, an elementary school teacher, shared the practices of her 1st-grade team:

Our team prioritized the standards and organized them in a pacing guide. Each week, we know which standard or learning target our students are expected to master as a team. We plan our interventions based on these standards. This shifts the mindset of students to know which intervention group they are attending and what they need to accomplish during that intervention time.

While high school and junior high did not share students during intervention time as the elementary school did, four of the junior high and high school teachers interviewed did express that establishing clear standards gave their students a goal to focus on during the class period.

Since Daniel School District is a small rural school district, two junior high teachers and three high school teachers operate as a singleton. They voiced their desire to collaborate with a team teaching the same standards but still valued alignment with teachers purveying the same content.

Theme 2: Reporting evidence of student learning in a shared drive impacts daily instruction. A teacher leader from the junior high campus reported that, although sharing data through a shared drive “seemed invasive,” it nonetheless drove them to ensure that data collection was completed in timely manner. The teacher also indicated that she was worried the information could be used as an evaluation tool. However, she saw the benefits in sharing evidence. The data reporting thus served as an accountability component for teachers. One teacher from the high school campus offered: “I was frustrated with team members for not bringing data to our meetings. Now that they know our information is being shared in leadership meetings, they are doing the work in their classrooms.” The focus groups on the elementary and junior high campuses reported data prompted conversations on sharing instructional strategies. One teacher shared the following example during the focus group: “My class results on one of the standards was low. Another teacher’s results were much higher. She shared the resource she used when teaching the standard with our team. The next week I was able to bring evidence back to our team showing the strategy worked in my class too.” Overall, the focus groups for each of the campuses reported that sharing data frequently affected their daily instructional practices.

Research Question 2: How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact PLCs?

To determine how members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities, the researcher utilized

qualitative data from surveys and interviews. This survey data was perception data gathered from sixty-nine staff members and the interviews occurred with members of the DI team. Two themes recurred in the collection of data. The culture of the district improved with the increased collaboration was one theme. The other theme was similar to that found in research question one; a sense of urgency in responding to student learning was increased as the system of monitoring increased.

Theme 1: Collaboration with teams is credited with improving the culture of the district. As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, Daniel School District operated in isolation prior to implementing the PLC process, having received intense professional development from outside consultants. However, the superintendent shared that when consultants were not physically on campus the teams' work was not as apparent. According to the superintendent, conversations were comparatively less focused and tended to shift toward structural or managerial issues, or they even became venting sessions for teachers and administrators. Throughout the action research, the DI teams worked through a systematic monitoring structure to operate as a professional learning community. As their system progressed, collaboration among educators became more focused. Ten of the twelve teachers voiced that collaboration united the teachers. One of them expressed: "We are learning so much more together in a collaborative environment. Everyone is headed in the same direction. Same standard – same rigor. Isolation is not allowed or accepted. And we are sharing kids during interventions." Two teachers, again, shared concerns that not all their colleagues had a team with the same subject and grade level with whom to collaborate on standards. One explained: "Being part of a team has been a bonus, but more often than not, we tend to visit about personal life or things that don't pertain to curriculum because we don't share the same standards. I have never been paired with another teacher so the

collaboration is nice. Not being able to accomplish the same as others, is disappointing.”

Largely, teachers having time to collaborate improved the climate and, in most cases, the culture of the district.

Theme 2: A sense of urgency in responding to student learning is increased through monitoring. Teachers responded to student learning with a greater sense of urgency when the monitoring of products increased. When asked what changed most, one teacher offered: “We grouped students based on needs when the progress reports were sent home or when the nine weeks grades were reported. Now, we are changing groups weekly, based on their skills.”

Another teacher from the high school campus reported that changing student groups was not as fluid as they would like due to student schedules. They continued, sharing that teacher response to student learning was occurring more frequently than it had in the past and surmising that it was due to teachers knowing that the data was being monitored by their colleagues.

Research Question 3: What do members of the AR team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

As the AR team engaged in a professional learning community, they served as learners and leaders in creating collaboration. Two themes emerged through the action research study to focus on improving or changing. Data for RQ3 was collected from interviews, agendas, and surveys.

Theme 1: Campus leadership drives the success of PLCs. The researcher disseminated the “Teachers Gauging Transparency” survey in September 2020. The survey focused on teachers’ perceptions of how their voices were heard and received by leadership. The results of that survey are given in Figure 10. On average, out of 69 submissions, junior high and high school scored highest in “leadership voices concerns.” Junior high averaged 4.63 on a Likert

scale of 1–5. High school scored 3.93 on the same scale. The survey did offer beneficial results, but the subjectivity of the statement requested was misleading. During the October DI team meeting, the results were discussed; the majority of the team read the statement as “the leadership always voices concerns” and few read the statement as “leadership has a relationship to freely voice concerns.” Some scored in a negative tone and some scored in a positive tone. This was realized when a teacher expressed concerns during interviews: “Leadership has different expectations on each campus in the professional learning community process.”

Figure 11

Gauging Transparency

Teachers	ELEM	JR HIGH	HIGH	Grand Total
Teachers sharing ideas	4	4.13	3.69	11.82
Leadership sharing ideas	4.19	4.38	3.86	12.43
Teachers’ freedom to voice concerns	3.85	4.38	3.76	11.99
Leadership to voice concerns	4.26	4.63	3.93	12.82
Open communication between teachers and leaders	3.44	4.38	3.1	10.92
Open communication between leaders and teachers	3.26	3.25	2.72	9.23
Teachers confident in motives of leadership	4.15	4.63	3.69	12.47
Leaders confident in motives in teachers	4.3	4.5	3.79	12.59
Teachers understand actions of leaders	3.74	3.75	3.28	10.77
Leaders understand actions of teachers	3.93	4.25	3.41	11.59
Safety in providing feedback	3.63	4	3.38	11.01
Leadership shares processes	3.93	4.25	3.41	11.59
Grand Total	46.68	50.53	42.02	139.23

NOTE: Yellow indicates areas to grow and green indicates strength.

On the survey, another teacher commented: “When there are problems or concerns with individual staff members or even a few staff members, address those individuals instead of the entire staff. Corrective criticisms towards whole groups lower morale. This works the same in the classrooms with students. A positive working and learning environment benefit all staff and students.”

All three campuses scored lowest in open communication between the teachers and leaders. This theme did surface throughout the interviews with the following phases: “principal is not involved”; “not all teachers are informed”; “communication is lacking”; and “trust is not felt.” The interesting correlation between the survey and the interviews did not align, and the survey showed higher results than the teachers expressed. Either way, positive or negative, both collections of data led to the campus leaders’ involvement in the process, which was an indicator of success.

Theme 2: Giving teachers a voice empowers them to have ownership in the process and lead others. The AR team and the DI team created a monitoring system. October 2020, the teams organized a shared Google drive to collect evidence of products. Each team had their own roles in the monitoring system. The AR team monitored weekly meetings, agendas, unit plans, and data while the DI team monitored with the aim of supporting teams in submitting agendas, assessments, unit plans, and data. In November 2020, the DI team formed subcommittees to focus on one practice of PLCs. A member of the subcommittee became responsible for contacting teacher teams for clarification of products. One committee reached out to seven teams to locate essential standards in the drive. Within two weeks, 100% of the teams completed and uploaded their essential standards. Another committee focused on reviewing unit plans and providing feedback. Two teacher teams requested additional support. The committee and teacher leaders sat with the teams and walked them through the expectations for each component of the unit plan. Job-embedded professional development morphed as a result of responses to the monitoring system. Hattie (2012) asserts that “Collective Teacher Efficacy is the collective belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students. With an effect size of $d=1.57$, Collective Teacher Efficacy is strongly correlated with student achievement” (p. 26) The researcher

observed and journaled teachers' increased involvement and ownership of the process. Conversations were focused on students. The teachers were sharing ideas and offering suggestions. The researcher observed teachers develop a better understanding of their students' strengths and weaknesses through data conversations. As Hattie (2018) uncovered in his research, increased teacher efficacy can increase student achievement. Teacher efficacy increased at Daniel School District, as self-reported, from the increased collaboration and conversations.

Chapter Summary

The data were collected over a 6-month period, and collection was often interrupted by logistical responses to the global pandemic. Overall, the researcher's AR project resulted in the development of a monitoring system which provided clarity of expectations to teachers, students, and other stakeholders. In a small, rural school district that was accustomed to operating in compliance and isolation, this systematic approach gave confirmation and organization to the professional learning community's practices. The system revealed themes addressing each of the research questions.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Summary of the Findings

This action research project sought findings that could lead to the transformation of a small, rural school district into a sustainable professional learning community. The qualitative data enabled the AR team to uncover common themes to guide the district in becoming a successful professional learning community with ongoing adult and student learning. The district had received intense professional development on professional learning communities. The AR team found that the expectations of the practices lacked clarity in transferring into a process. The AR team conducted observations and collected evidence to determine which practices were non-negotiable. The DI team created and implemented a monitoring system to support the teacher teams. While some teachers felt that the monitoring system constituted a layer of additional work, the submitted products furnished evidence that the PLC process was being transferred into daily instructional practices.

Inconsistencies in the study occurred due to the global pandemic, especially in causing the district and individual teachers to pivot from face-to-face to virtual instruction on multiple occasions. The inconsistency unintentionally added to the study. When implementing a district-wide systematic approach, consistency needs to occur in order for monitoring and expectations for each campus to transform a district. The perception data revealed that the culture of the campus hinges on leader involvement in the process and on clear and consistent expectations.

The capacity of teacher leaders increased as a result of the mutual accountability system that was implemented. Teachers joined leadership in monitoring products, and they collected missing data or supported other teachers in their practices as needed. The transparency of shared drives and data increased the quality of the products. Ultimately, job-embedded professional development that was provided by teachers for other teachers increased teacher efficacy overall.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The literature reviewed supports the findings of the action research project (Appendix A). The literature offers a series of practices to create an ongoing process for cultivating an effective professional learning community. The success of professional learning communities has been a subject of research since the 1960s and it offers sound evidence of improved student achievement. The following emphasizes the major findings related to the literature reviewed.

Finding 1

Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) summarize that effective collaboration advance in a theory of action by identifying the relationship between the network and the leadership. The literature guides leaders in creating the environment of trust and collaboration necessary to shift an organization. Analysis of the data confirms that leadership matters. Findings from Willis and Templeton (2018) indicate that mutual trust and buy-ins from teachers are substantial factors in influencing a professional learning community in rural school district.

According to Buckingham (2005), the single most important thing leaders must remember is to communicate clearly and consistently to stakeholders throughout the organization. The staff at Daniel School District were equipped with the knowledge of professional learning communities but lacked clarity in the process. The action research

confirmed that the provision of clarity and accountability throughout the systematic approach impacted and enhanced the PLC process.

Finding 2

Evidence of teacher team collaboration informs the impact of daily instructional practices and student learning. Bailey and Jakicic (2019) confirmed that teachers working interdependently in a collaborative team have a greater impact on student achievement than they do working in isolation. While significant shifts in practice are evident, the evidence of impact on student learning is not. The action research found that a system for tracking evidence resulted in positive changes, but few teams still operated in a “do what we are told to do” practice. Findings indicated that teachers’ wish for leaders to address an individual’s negative behaviors in private or through email rather than in a public forum. As Robert Evans (2001) concludes, “confrontation forms a matching bookend with clarity and focus” (p. 288).

Finding 3

Teachers self-reported increased efficacy when a platform was available for voices to be heard and be to serve as an instrument in the process. Filho et al. (2018) asserts that faculty and student commitment to engagement transforms and sustains learning. Current literature reviews support that empowering teachers to be leaders and creating a sense of community among teachers influence the positive outcomes of professional learning communities and increase the chances of sustainability (Willis et.al, 2018). The action research project highlighted teacher leadership and its importance in creating a support systems for their colleagues.

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

The purpose of this action research project was to transform a district into a specific professional learning community through an ongoing process in student and adult learning. The

AR project focused on how to build collaborative team capacity through a blend of the cultivation of positive culture, creation of appropriate conditions, development of support systems, and promotion of job-embedded professional learning.

The following research questions guided the AR study:

1. How does the implementation of professional learning communities in a rural school district impact daily instructional practice?
2. How do members of a district-wide action research team in a rural school district describe the impact of professional learning communities?
3. What do members of the action research team learn as they engage in a collaborative district model of a professional learning community?

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Daily instructional practices were found to be impacted through the AR study. While data were collected in all four cycles of the research, whether or not practices were transferred from discussions to implementation, data were not analyzed by student achievement to determine the implications. Agendas, interviews, and observations documented that teachers were clear on their standards and communicated expectations to students. In addition, the monitoring system held teachers accountable for producing student learning evidence through the use of shared drives during team time.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

The impact of the PLC process was found by the researcher to be empowering to the staff. Evidence drove decisions, and decisions drove instruction. Teachers reported that they felt they had more ownership in the process, even though accountability had increased. That interesting finding was followed by the finding that clarity of expectations alleviated the feeling

of secrecy and fostered transparency instead. The majority of teachers conveyed that they did not mind the extra accountability so long as they know and understood the expectations.

An additional finding of RQ2 is that school culture improved as collaborative team time was protected and teachers consequently felt more united as a district. The collaboration process grew more slowly on the secondary campuses than the elementary campus. Teachers attributed this delayed reception to the fact there were more singleton teachers on the secondary campuses. It is important to note that not all of the teachers embraced collaboration at the conclusion of this study.

Findings Related to Research Question 3:

The action research team was informed through cycle 1, cycle 2, cycle 3, and cycle 4. Their learning grew with each cycle. The interviews and observations in cycle 1 presented concise data the action research team needed to define clarity and focus to the expectations of the practices. The survey results administered in cycle 2 caused the action research team to pause and discuss the role of the campus leader in the professional learning community process. The teachers shared through interviews the need to have the campus leader consistently involved in the process. Two principals were comfortable with the district school improvement specialist leading the work for their campus. Findings showed otherwise.

The AR team also found that the monitoring system they had created provided professional learning opportunities for teachers. This finding emerged in cycle 3 and was explored at a minimal level as teachers responded to adult learners who had been identified as needing support through collected agendas.

Limitations of the Current Study

There were significant limitations of the current study. COVID-19 created an unpredictable education environment that forced staff to quickly learn how to deliver instruction virtually and how to build relationships with students through a learning management system; it also helped them perceive the value of professional learning communities in the midst of a pandemic. The pandemic environment led to many rescheduled or canceled team meetings which extended the action research longer than initially planned.

The researcher was not employed at the time of the study at the district where the action research occurred. For the first few meetings, the researcher traveled to the district. Later, most meetings were held remotely via digital platforms. The irregularities occurring due to the pandemic led to meeting irregularities, which in turn led to inconsistent data gathering. For instance, there were two meeting in which teams did not follow through with planned actions because they had forgotten to do so. Not seeing the researcher on a daily basis had an adverse effect on full participation.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

The findings from this AR study offer implications for practitioners implementing district-wide professional learning communities. The findings suggest that district and campus leaders ought to deploy a hands-on approach when leading a professional learning community. Clear expectations of their role in the process is imperative if the professional learning community is to expand district wide. Administrators may not lead every meeting or attend every meeting, but active involvement from leadership determine whether professional learning communities can impact student learning.

As a result of the action research study, platforms are developed in the state of which the study was conducted for administrators leading professional learning communities to share successful practices or barriers with other administrators in the state wanting to implement the PLC process. The avenues utilized to share practices are offered through webinars, state conferences, or intentional partnerships between schools.

In addition to being clear with expectations for administrators, the same practice should be implemented with teacher leadership teams. A monitoring system must be framed out to provide clarity to all stakeholders. As PLC practices are introduced and modeled, they may be added to the PLC framework as a negotiable or non-negotiable. The leadership team and guiding coalition should create their framework collectively.

Practitioners of professional learning communities should include in their system of support avenues for teachers to offer professional learning to other teachers. This practice not only supports teachers' professional growth, but it also builds the capacity of teacher leaders. The action research studied resulted in the researcher developing an avenue for singleton teachers to collaborate with other singleton teachers of the same content in teams throughout the state. The teacher teams collaborate digitally using the same PLC practices and processes as teachers collaborating physically within a campus. This practice addresses the need of small rural schools that employ singletons and may be in need of a collaborative team.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

As the present study was conducted in the specific context of a small, rural school district, further research examining how to design collaborative teacher teams with singleton teachers is needed. For example, if the district only employs one Agriculture Science teacher, what does collaboration look like for that teacher?

In the present study, the teams designed their own monitoring system. Further research is needed on an effective monitoring system designed around professional learning community practices and processes. Instead of teams leaving the designing and implementation of a monitoring system for each participant to interpret, research is needed on a universal tool to lead districts through the process.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

Funding for professional development is appropriated from state and federal funds. How a district spends those funds is usually left in the hands of local decision makers with stipulations from the funding sources. Local policy makers need to take into account the recommendations for professional development through job-embedded professional development. Another consideration, when allocating funds, is to invest in current staff to enable them to become the practitioners and leaders of professional growth. It is necessary to provide the training they need to come back to the campus and lead. Too often, educators, seek professional development from outside sources and then the practices taught do not remain with the learner once the presenter leaves.

Furthermore, professional development should be attached to an action cycle of “plan, do, check.” With the cycle of action in place, professional development attendees would have to produce evidence of implementation and effectiveness beyond simple evaluations.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

The purpose of this action research study was to engage a sample of teachers and administrators to explore their perceptions of why professional learning community practices have not been sustained as an ongoing process in the district and to discuss how to achieve that goal. The study intentionally focused on a small rural school district with rich traditions, life-

long community members, high teacher turnover and low teacher applicant pools. The leaders were a product of the rural community who sought to continue what they were accustomed to in spite of the declining economy and population.

The conclusions from this study follow the research questions and the findings, and therefore address how a professional learning community impacts daily instructional practices and a district's response to the implementation. In addition, the study highlighted what was learned as the district engaged in the collaborative district model of a professional learning community. After years of professional development, through the action research study, the district came to the simple conclusions that clarity, communication, a monitoring system, and sharing leadership provided a start to an ongoing process. During COVID, there were interruptions in the study to respond to the pandemic. Those interruptions functioned to affirm the basic premise that consistency in the process is a key element for success.

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APPENDIX A
EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Carpenter, Daniel (2015)	School culture and leadership of professional communities	To explore supportive and shared leadership structures at schools as a function of school culture policies and procedures.	Qualitative study was conducted by interviewing, observing professional learning communities and collecting artifacts to explore school culture policies, procedures and leadership in the implementation of professional learning community practices.	Administrators and teachers from three secondary schools in Midwestern USA. All schools served students in 9 th - 12 th grades. Enrollments at the schools ranged from 1,400 students to 2,000 students.	One school had a shared leadership structure. The school leaders empowered the teachers to lead the professional learning communities and equipped with them strategies and data to do so. The other two schools had no shared leadership structure, policies or procedures. One leader displayed distrust with staff.	This study concludes that school leaders must provide supportive and shared leadership. The leader must be an active participant in the professional learning communities to promote a collective commitment to student achievement.	This study could provide leverage for educational leaders to successfully implement collaborative groups in order to collectively solve problems in instructional practices.

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Giles, Corrie and Hargreaves (February 2006)	The Sustainability of Innovative Schools as Learning Organizations and Professional Learning Communities During Standardized Reform	Explores the impact of these influences on three innovative schools and their sustainability over time. It concentrates in particular on the promise and viability of one of these schools, which has been consciously modeled as a learning organization and professional learning community.	Conducted over 4 years, this project explored teacher and administrator perceptions of change over time in a variety of urban and suburban settings. Case study data were gathered for all three schools by recording semi structured interviews with a random sample of retired and active teachers and administrators from different eras of cohorts.	Three particularly innovative secondary schools that form part of an eight-school international research project1 in the province of Ontario, Canada, and in New York State.	Through reforms, competitive pressures, evolutionary attrition to change, the schools were not able to sustain their innovative institutions.	Concludes that the learning organization and professional learning community model may provide a more robust resistance to conventional processes of the attrition of change and of surrounding change forces, but much like other innovative schools, it also shows signs of defaulting to conventional patterns of schooling in the face of standardized reform.	The research on the three schools should not be generalized to all schools but develops a need for more extensive research on the topic.

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Filho, W. L., Raath, S., Lazzarini, B., Vargas, V., Souza, L. D., Anholon, R., Orlovic, V. (2018).	The role of transformation in learning and education for sustainability	Present how transformation in learning in education for sustainability requires the commitment of Faculty and the engagement of students.	A set of qualitative case studies were used in higher education institutions across seven countries	A set of qualitative case studies were used in higher education institutions across seven countries	Revealed that the concept of education for sustainable development has not been sufficiently integrated into the concept of transformation in higher education institutions.	Reflections of the academics on their own values and support of universities to interdisciplinary collaboration between them is crucial for developing the transformative potential of students as agents and of a sustainable future.	The study brought in concrete examples of transformative initiatives and how sustainable practices are implemented. However, in order to sustain the practices further work has to be in place and continued around a collaborative culture.

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Willis, J. C., & Templeton, N. R. (2018).	Investigating the Establishment and Sustainability of Professional Learning Communities in Rural East Texas: The Principals Perspectives	Was to identify factors that rural school principals perceive to have the most influence in establishing sustainable professional learning communities	Qualitative study through interviews of seven principals in rural East Texas	Seven principals with a minimum number of 3 years in the position were included in the study.	Findings indicated buy-in from teachers and mutual trusts were substantial factors influencing the leadership component. of PLCs in rural schools	Specifically, principals believed that empowering teachers to be leaders and creating the sense of community among teachers influenced the positive outcomes of PLCs not only for school goals but also for student learning.	Principals must intentionally facilitate connecting the PLC framework using professional development to affect organizational change and subsequently impact campus learning

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Rincón-Gallardo, S., & Fullan, M. (2016).	Essential features of effective networks in education.	Advance clarity and precision around effective action in networks, understood as collaboration that: first, deepens the learning and engagement of students and adults; second, enhances the professional capital of teachers and leaders; and third, becomes a positive force of whole system improvement	Literature reviews and studies aimed at identifying characteristics of effective networks in education; and second, network case studies and R & D initiatives that used networks as their improvement strategy and had demonstrated positive impact on student outcomes or on one or more professional capital variables often associated with improved student outcomes	Two sources of evidence were identified and reviewed: first, literature reviews and studies aimed at identifying characteristics of effective networks in education; and second, network case studies and R & D initiatives that used networks as their improvement strategy and had demonstrated positive impact on student outcomes or on one or more professional capital variables often associated with improved student outcomes.	Eight essential features of effective networks identified and three required shifts in the relationship between networks and central leadership	Summarizes what is known to date about effective collaboration in networks and advance a theory of action that causally links network activities with improved student outcomes and enhanced professional capital. This theory of action, summarized in eight essential features, simultaneously offers key hypotheses for social network theory in education and actionable guidelines to develop effective networks.	They offer a clear and actionable set of guidelines to develop effective networks. Also offers guidelines to enhance the effectiveness of networks, and thus contributes to the realization of the yet unfulfilled promise of networks.

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Hoy, W. K., & Tarter, C. J. (2011).	Power principles for educational leaders: research into practice.	The aim of this article is to examine the empirical literature on irrationality and identify a set of concepts to help administrators cope with irrationality in decision making.	The inquiry attempts to demonstrate the utility of empirical research in guiding everyday practice as one copes with intrinsic irrationality.	This analysis is a synthesis of the selected research literature on irrationality.	A set of seven concepts and propositions was identified that are critical in understanding the influence on irrationality on decision making.	The power of perception, simplification, decisiveness, deadlines, norms, ownership, and emotional expectation are critical principles to understand in implementing practice.	The propositions proposed are ways to deal constructively with irrational behavior in decision making, but it is only a beginning. The concepts, propositions, and their application to practice are not well-known in educational administration and are useful tools for educational leaders.

Author(s), Date	Title	Purpose	Method(s)	Sample	Result(s)	Conclusion(s)	Implication(s)
Vandeyar, S. (2017).	The Teacher as an Agent of Meaningful Educational Change.	Looking from the outside in to how a teacher can bring change to a diverse classroom.	Interviews and observations were used to chart the change of a teacher over the course of a year.	Over the period of a year, a teacher's behaviors were documented by the teacher's response to diverse students.	Teaching is much more than being sensitive and sensitized to diverse cultural backgrounds of students. It is about moving teaching and learning away from the deficit approach or a "culture of poverty" to embracing an asset-based approach and "funds of knowledge."	Teaching is ultimately a class act of human compassion.	Teacher training programs should incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogy and socio-cultural responsive teaching to effectively prepare teachers for practice in a class of diverse learners.

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Classroom observations are conducted and compiled for results as a district. Enter the classroom and look for the following:

1. What actions do you observe of the teacher? Check those that apply.

☐ Does the teacher have a learning objective posted?

☐ Is the teacher teaching in whole group lecture format?

☐ Is the teacher working in small groups?

2. Are learning objectives clear to students?

☐ Can at least two students explain what they are learning from the instruction?

3. Do students have a growth mindset?

☐ Can at least two students in the class articulate whether or not they have mastered the skill taught?

☐ Can at least two students in the class explain what it takes to master the skill?

4. Have teachers set structures to respond to learning needs?

☐ Can at least two students tell you what happens if a skill is not mastered?

☐ Can at least two students tell you how they receive interventions?

☐ Can at least two students tell you what happens if the skill is already mastered?

APPENDIX C

TEACHER SURVEY FOR GAUGING TRANSPARENCY

REPRODUCIBLE

Teacher Survey for Gauging Transparency

Directions: Choose the number rating that best describes your perception of each statement.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

- ☐ 1a. I have the freedom to express my own ideas to school leadership.
- ☐ 1b. School leadership freely expresses its ideas to me.
- ☐ 2a. I have the freedom to express problems to school leadership.
- ☐ 2b. School leadership freely expresses problems it sees.
- ☐ 3a. I rarely hold conversations with other teachers in the building that school leadership isn't privy to.
- ☐ 3b. There are rarely conversations held in the school building that I'm not privy to.
- ☐ 4a. I feel confident in the motives of administrators and coaches when they walk through my classroom.
- ☐ 4b. School leadership has confidence in my motives for teaching.
- ☐ 5a. I understand the reason behind every action, task, and initiative in the building.
- ☐ 5b. School leadership knows the reason behind every action, activity, and process in my classroom.
- ☐ 6a. I have a visible and safe process for providing feedback regarding how the school is led.
- ☐ 6b. School leadership shares feedback with me using visible and safe processes.

APPENDIX D

INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM

**Daniel School District
Informal Classroom Observation Form**

Teacher: _____

Date: _____ **Time:** _____ **Grade Level(s):** _____

Standard(s)/ "I can"(s): _____

Domain 2: The Classroom Environment

	Observed	Evidence/Comments
1. Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport		
Mutual Respect (interactions student-teacher; student-student)		
2. Establishing a Culture for Learning		
3. Managing Classroom Procedures		
4. Managing Student Behavior		
High expectations for ALL (Academic & Social)		
Following/Consistent Procedures		
Verbal Praise & Positive Reinforcement		

Domain 3: Instruction

1. Communicating with Student		
I Can Statements Posted/Stated		
Teacher modeling		
Effective/Intentional Teaching		
2. Using Questions and Discussing Techniques		
Higher-level Bloom's questioning		
3. Engaging Students in Learning		
Engaging Activities		
Students actively engaged with appropriate material to maximize all instructional time available		
Meaningful Discussions		
Appropriate peer tutoring/feedback		
4. Using Assessment in Instruction		
Formative assessment with corrective feedback		
Teacher monitoring/Answering questions		
5. Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness		
Differentiation		

APPENDIX E

GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions

Pre-Research Questions

Can you tell us what kind of teacher you are? Think of age, subject, and experience.

What are your expectations in participating in the PLC?

What are your motives for participating in the PLC?

How would you describe the learning culture and atmosphere in the PLC?

To what extent do you experience possibilities in the PLC for your professional development?

To what extent do you experience possibilities in the school for your professional development and for school improvement?

What are some significant differences between the possibilities in the PLC and in the school?

What are you confronted with when trying to change or improve practices in your school?

Post Research Questions:

Did you experience dilemmas or conflicts during your participation in the PLC?

Can you give an example of such a learning outcome?

To what extent did such possibilities increase or decrease?

Did you experience dilemmas or conflicts when increasing possibilities? Within the school, within the PLC, or between the school and the PLC?

How would you describe the learning culture and atmosphere in the PLC?

How did you learn in the PLC? To what extent is there a collective learning process?

What are the collective learning outcomes of the PLC? What forms did it take?

To what extent was it possible for you to increase possibilities in the school?

To what extent was it possible for you to link the PLC and the school?

To what extent did you change through participating in a PLC?

What changed or improved in the school because of your participation in the PLC?

To what extent have your expectations changed during the year?

How was your participation for the PLC initiated?

Can you give an example of changes and/or initiation?

To what extent did the learning culture and atmosphere in the PLC change?

What was the involvement of your colleagues and school administration?

Did the impact change during your participation?

Can you give an example of what you learned and what the impact was?

When you look back at the questions and answers you give, is there anything you'd like to add?

Did the interview give us an overview of the most important processes according to your participation in the PLC?