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A study of district leadership practices in the principal professional learning community

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A STUDY OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE PRINCIPAL

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE PRINCIPAL

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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This qualitative study was implemented in an urban, Title I school district in the southern

portion of the United States. The problem the study addressed was that the various

phenomena pertaining to the implementation of the principal professional learning

community (PPLC), as perceived by the 14 participating elementary school principals,

had not been examined to determine their influence. Qualitative data were acquired from

the principals through personal interviews.

Findings suggested that, with the regular opportunities for principals to share ideas and

thoughts with their colleagues, PPLC participants perceived improved performance

involving (a) the attributes of high skillfulness and high participation within the

leadership capacity matrix described by Lambert (1998, 2003); (b) leadership capacity in

daily practices, as reflected in adult learning theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson,

1998); (c) the collaborative nature of school leadership, empowerment, and the centrality

of student learning, 3 of the 4 guiding principles of effective leadership identified by the

Council of Chief State School Officers (1996); (d) continuous school improvement, as

noted in the ISLLC Standard 1 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996); (e) the

ability to make positive changes in their school communities; and (f) the 7 leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006). Responses further indicated that the initial PPLC was reflective of instructional leadership, collaboration, student achievement, and campus management, 4 attributes comprising the school based PLC model. The primary emphasis of participants' responses embraced the collaboration and overall learning that occurred. This finding was profound, given the belief that the principalship is a position, in many ways, of isolation.

Based on findings, the researcher recommends the ongoing development and implementation of the PPLC. The researcher additionally recommends this study be replicated at the end of a 3-year period, and that findings be compared to those derived from the current study to determine whether participants' perceptions of related phenomena have changed. Once results are derived from the recommended study, a determination can be made whether to continue the PPLC.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

Today's educational environment has reached unprecedented complexity. Not only have students become more diverse and at risk of school failure (Bennett, 2003; Gollnick & Chinn, 2004), but governmental mandates have simultaneously required sustainable evidence of continued improvement through formal legislation. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 1965), the catalyst that introduced initial expectations, was refined and intensified with the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, 2011). This subsequent legislation brought requirements for incremental performance improvements of student subgroups for the first time.

In the urban school district serving as the research setting, educational priorities and practices involving all student subgroups were underscored through state legislation establishing rigid expectations for improved educational outcomes. District-based mandates, which mirrored state and federal priorities, added related policies and procedures to establish local accountability. Governmental mandates often generated expectations with limited financial support at the local level. Under these myriad expectations, the salient role of the school principal is critical (Crum & Whitney, 2008; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004; Schlechty, 2002). As Barth (1984) clearly asserted, "the quality of a school is related to the quality of its leadership" (p. 93).

This qualitative study involved an integral examination of leadership development within a southern school district. Leaders throughout the district, beginning with the

trustees serving on the school board, shared in the responsibility by identifying a mission and vision, together with a strategic action plan, exemplifying learning for both students and adults. To achieve related goals, trustees mandated the establishment of a principal professional learning community (PPLC) throughout the district at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year. There was no formalized PPLC framework specifically designated for principals. The superintendent was responsible for providing training and guidance to the school principals in support of the collaborative inquiry processes of the PPLC. Through the concerted efforts of the trustees and superintendent, it was anticipated that principals would be positioned for improved individual and collective effectiveness. This study describes the integral processes of establishing the initial principal PPLC but was also designed to explore principals' perceptions regarding various influences of the initiative.

Purpose of the Study

The problem this study addressed was that various phenomena pertaining to the implementation of the PPLC, as perceived by principals, had not been examined to determine their influence. The need existed to identify perceptions related to practical aspects of the phenomena regarding school practices. The traditional PLC model was initially designed for incorporation at the school level (DuFour, 1995, 1997); its application among principals for enhancing leadership capacity was unknown at the onset of the study (R. DuFour, personal communication, June 6, 2010). Determining related influences of the PPLC represented an opportunity to identify and provide essential information to trustees for their use in making subsequent leadership decisions.

Bass and Bass (2008) described leadership as an "observable, learnable set of

practices" (p. 10). The purpose of the study was to examine principals' perceptions of various phenomena related to their participation in the PLC and to identify findings to explain influences and practical aspects of the phenomena as they affect leadership knowledge, dispositions, and skills. By implementing the study, it was additionally anticipated that an understanding would be gained regarding the infusion of the PPLC within the research setting. As expected, understanding key aspects of related phenomena were useful in identifying recommendations for improved school leadership in support of the district mission and vision.

Research Questions

Five research questions guided the study:

1. How do participants describe the influences of the PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by Lambert (2003)?

2. How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

3. How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

4. How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)? This question was supported by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a) developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical

leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership.

5. What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?

Data Collection Methods

First, the researcher completed the school district requirements for access to personnel information which identified the elementary school principals throughout the district. To conduct research involving the school district, the researcher was required to complete a research application similar to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas research protocol proposal form. The school district research application was comprised of four parts. Part A sought applicant information and project identification which consisted of researcher contact information and credentials. Part B required a description of the study including the identification of the problem, research design, and data collection methods. Part C sought details regarding protocol for research involving human subjects. Part D was a signature page for the applicant, faculty advisor, and school district sponsor.

Representatives of the school district provided the researcher the list of elementary principals that was used to identify volunteer study candidates. The researcher clearly explained the study to the elementary administrators, without coercion, and requested their participation in the study. The need to acquire informed consent was explained to all candidates, and each received a copy of the signed consent form created by the researcher. The researcher sought permission to conduct semi-structured interviews, using the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and took handwritten notes during the interviews. Interviews were conducted based on the interview protocol developed in advance and tested with an experienced group of three principals reflecting demographics

similar to the study sample participants. The interviews were guided by the five research questions that guided the study.

Participants received an interview guide with questions in advance. Each study participant was interviewed at the location of their choice. Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes, with the anticipated range of time for each interview being 60 to 90 minutes. A transcript of the interview was provided to each participant for member checking. Participants were given the opportunity to make additions, corrections, or any modifications to their own interviews. Finally, the transcribed interviews were analyzed and coded; findings were incorporated within this final report.

Conceptual Framework

Constructivism, in its basic form, is a philosophy contending that individuals construct their own learning and understanding while interacting in physical and social contexts (Vygotsky, 1986). This precept incorporates the belief that knowledge is subjective, personal, and based on one's cognition levels (Meece, 2002; Schunk, 2004; Vygotsky, 1986). Constructivism has significantly affected the evolution of longstanding human development theories as well as modern perspectives involving educational processes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Schunk, 2004; Simpson, 2002). Over time, the philosophical precepts of constructivism have broadened with the addition of a variety of perspectives involving the topics of information processing, behaviorism, and cognition (Schunk, 2004; Simpson, 2002).

Vygotsky, with his contribution of social-constructivist theory, is believed to have influenced modern constructivist thinking more than any other theorist (Berk, 2005; Schunk, 2004). As Schunk (2004) reported, Vygotsky predicated his views on the belief

that humans have some ability, through the collective avenues of consciousness, social interaction, culture, and language, to influence the environment in reflection of their own purposes. Consequently, humans have the capacity to do much more than simply react to environmental factors as promoted by other theorists such as Pavlov (Schunk, 2004). Meece (2002) similarly reported that Vygotsky purported the belief that social interactions are critical in the learning process, given the belief that "knowledge is co-constructed between two or more people" and that "language is the most critical tool" (p. 170).

Of primary importance to this qualitative study was the dialectical perspective of constructivism, which reflects the belief that social influence, such as peer collaboration, promotes the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). Jacobsen, Eggen, and Kauchak (2006) endorsed this tenet by stating, "A constructivist learning environment prioritizes and facilitates the student's active role" (p. 6) by involving self-reflection as a mitigating factor of the learning experience. Jacobsen et al. further stated that constructivism emphasizes the role of prior understanding as a key component in the learning process. Because the PPLC model, which was designed to promote leadership development through participation in a PLC (DuFour, 2002), incorporates factors of collaboration, self-reflection, and the critical role of prior understanding, constructivism was an evident choice of conceptual framework for use in this study. This belief was succinctly supported by the research of Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) stating that the PLC model involves "notions of enquiry, reflection and self-evaluating schools" (p. 223). Schmoker (2006) also underscored the importance of educators' professional interactions by contending that "unlike other professionals, and despite near

universal agreement on the importance of teaming, teachers do not work in teams" (p. 18).

Significance of the Study

The urban public school district wherein this study was implemented was of average size for the southern state, with approximately 15,170 enrolled students and 1,000 teachers. The 27 district facilities included 15 elementary schools, wherein approximately 50% of students were enrolled; eight middle schools, with approximately 22% of district students; and four high schools, including two alternative schools for high school completion, wherein the combined enrollment includes the remaining 28% of students.

In 2009, the district was rated academically unacceptable because of the discrepancy between the percent of students completing district high schools compared to the percentage of students completing high school across the state. In 2008, 89.5% of students across the state completed high school, yet only 78.5% in the district were completers. Similarly, in 2007, 88% of students throughout the state completed high school as compared to 76.8% of students attending district schools within the research setting.

Based on annual needs assessments, trustees of the school board mandated the infusion of a PPLC to promote improved school practices and increase student achievement. As noted in board minutes, the use of school based PLCs was believed to be the most effective approach for implementing high quality, effective professional development. Mandating the PPLC, however, was expected to build leadership capacity throughout all district schools in preparation to implement school based PLCs throughout the district.

Definition of Terms

Definitions are provided for terms either unique to the context of the study or in need of further clarity for conciseness.

The *Academic Excellence Indicator System* database was used for compiling performance data regarding each school and the school district wherein the study occurred.

A school campus was rated *academically acceptable* when (a) at least 70% of all students and each applicable student subgroup achieved the passing standard on the reading/English language arts subtest or met floor criteria and required improvement goals, (b) at least 70% of all students and each applicable student subgroup achieved the passing standard on the writing subtest or met floor criteria and required improvement goals, (c) at least 70% of all students and each applicable student subgroup achieved the passing standard on the social studies subtest or met floor criteria and required improvement goals, (d) at least 70% of all students and each applicable student subgroup achieved the passing standard on the mathematics subtest or met floor criteria and required improvement goals, (e) less than 55% of all students and each applicable student subgroup achieved the passing standard on the science subtest and failed to meet floor criteria and required improvement goals, (f) middle schools had no more than a 1.8% annual dropout rate or met required improvement factors, and (g) high schools had a completion rate of at least 75%.

Accountability standards were based on student performance on the state standardized test in reading/English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and writing for all students and in the student subgroups of African American, Hispanic,

White, and economically disadvantaged. District and school accountability ratings of exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, and academically unacceptable reflected the results derived from student performance.

Action research is a process of collective inquiry designed to assist in identifying and solving problems in the local setting (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008).

Four postsecondary educators served on the *advisory panel* to lend credibility to this study. These individuals reviewed the interview protocol to establish the appropriateness of the items and the clarity of verbiage. McMillan and Schumacher (2006) recommended garnering assistance from colleagues not affiliated with the research project as one method to improve the accuracy and credibility of a qualitative study.

Coding of data, using terms such as "words, phrases . . . subjects' ways of thinking, and events" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, pp. 172-175), will be accomplished as one step of the analysis process of data derived from the study. Coding will pertain to various topics involving participants' perceptions acquired through the data collection.

A systematic process for interdependently working together to improve practice was described by DuFour (2002) as *collaboration*.

The *completion rate* indicated the percent of students completing high school and included those who earned the General Educational Development diploma (American Council on Education, 2012).

The *confirmability* of data is the level of objectivity used during the processes of analyzing and interpreting findings (Merriam, 1998). Mills (2007) recommended the use of a variety of data sources and analysis methods in order to increase the confirmability of the study.

The *credibility* of qualitative research refers to the assurance that collected data are authentic and that they measure the intended phenomena (Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase the credibility of a study, Merriam (1998) recommended the researcher (a) engage in professional dialogue with colleagues while in the process of interpreting data, (b) utilize a triangulated design, (c) record responses of participants, and (d) conduct member checks.

Dependability is used to describe the "stability of data" (Mills, 2007, p. 86). To increase dependability, it was recommended that the processes used to collect, analyze, and interpret data be documented (Charles & Mertler, 2006; Mills, 2007).

A school campus was rated *exemplary* when (a) at least 90% of all students and applicable student subgroups achieved the passing standard on each of the subtests, (b) middle schools had no more than a 1.8% annual dropout rate or met required improvement factors, and (c) high schools had a completion rate of at least 95%.

Reeves (2004) described *leaders* as those "architects of individual and organizational improvement" (p. 27).

Leadership capacity is the process of "developing the collective ability [of] dispositions, skills, knowledge, and resources to act together to bring about positive change" (Fullan, 2005, p. 4). Lambert (1998, 2003) expounded on the definition by stating that participative behaviors and skills should include self-reflection, inquiry, professional dialogue, and "broad-based, skillful involvement in the work of leadership" (p. 3). These components were recommended for use in the PLC model.

During *member checking*, participants were first provided the typed transcript of their responses to the interview. Next, participants were asked to review responses and

determine whether they were accurate and complete. Those that were not confirmed were corrected. Likewise, if participants chose to expound on previous responses, revisions were documented. All changes occurred in the presence of participants, as recommended in the literature, to increase the accuracy and credibility of findings (Creswell, 2012; Glesne, 2005).

The *mission* of the school district in the research setting was to ensure innovation and excellence in education to prepare all learners for productive engagement in a global society.

In recognition of the belief that continuous, job-embedded learning for educators is the key to improved learning for students, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) defined a *professional learning community (PLC)* as the processes of educators working collaboratively through collective inquiry and action research on behalf of students.

A campus is rated *recognized* when (a) at least 80% of all students and applicable student subgroups achieved the passing standard on each of the subtests or all students and each applicable student subgroup met floor criteria and required improvement goals, (b) middle schools had no more than a 1.8% annual dropout rate or met required improvement factors, and (c) high schools had a completion rate of at least 85%.

Transferability, or generalizeability of results into the larger setting (Charles & Mertler, 2006; Mills, 2007), is not frequently obtained when conducting qualitative studies, given the fact that results are normally "context bound" (Mills, 2007, p. 86). Merriam (1998) recommended that researchers capture findings using rich language, metaphors, and similes in order to increase the possibility that findings may be transferable to other settings or, at the minimum, be useful to other researchers

conducting similar studies.

The *trustworthiness* of qualitative research involves the propensity of interpretations and other findings to be value laden and biased (Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To maximize trustworthiness, Mills (2007) reported that the researcher should identify interpretative commentary in the report of findings.

The school district *vision* was to pioneer 21st century learning.

Summary

This study was designed for implementation in a southern school district in the elementary school facilities within a district with an overall enrollment of approximately 8,500 students. In response to stringent governmental mandates to improve student performance delineated in NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, 2011), school board trustees mandated the development and implementation of a PPLC. This study examined principals' perceptions of various phenomena pertaining to the PLC to discover findings which may explain practical aspects of both influences and phenomena regarding school improvement. The school district's state rating of unsatisfactory provided support and significance to the study. The review of the literature, presented in Chapter 2, sets the groundwork for not only the PLC framework but the theory upon which this study was designed.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter is an exploration of the literature regarding theoretical models and professional practices relative to school learning communities. The topic of leadership development provided the impetus of the literature review. Based upon the literature, the researcher also examined the school based PLC model and related concepts pertaining to leadership development within a conceptual framework of constructivism.

After a discussion of the progression in organizational learning, an overview of both the principal and school based PLC model is provided. Selected ISLLC leadership standards, developed through the work of the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996, 2008), are also highlighted. These standards are supported through the endorsement of national leadership organizations (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, 2006).

The review is then expanded, as depicted in Figure 1, to include the leadership model espoused by Reeves (2006) as well as Lambert's leadership capacity framework (1998, 2003). Reeves and Lambert are respected authors who have developed renowned expertise within the field of educational leadership, as demonstrated through endorsements of their colleagues (Fullan, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Schlechty, 2002; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

Organizational Learning and Knowledge

The integral processes involving organizational learning and knowledge have evolved over the years. From a historical perspective, organizational knowledge is

believed to be a major influence on employee performance (Osland, Kolb, & Rubin, 2001; Rothwell, 2005). Organizational learning is "dominated by academics from within the area of human resources" (Chiva & Alegre, 2005, p. 50), yet the field of organizational knowledge encompasses economic language and is "chiefly studied by technologists and academics in the field of strategic management" (Chiva & Alegre, 2005, p. 50). Chiva and Alegre (2005) additionally reported that the two concepts of organizational knowledge and learning are rarely integrated within the literature.

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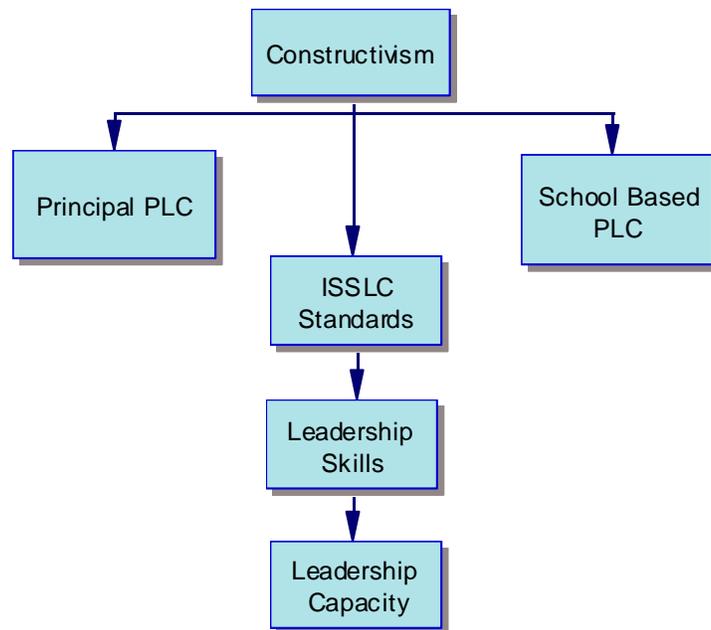
Figure 1. Conceptual framework and theoretical models depicting professional content and practices.

Common principles and challenges have been identified between the two concepts of organizational learning and knowledge. Organizational learning reflects two perspectives; the first is cognitive learning and the second, which is the stronger influence, is social learning (Chiva & Alegre, 2005). Spender (as cited in Chiva & Alegre, 2005) reported that the cognitive perspective focuses on organizational learning based on individual learning processes. Lave and Wenger (as cited in Chiva & Alegre, 2005) reported that

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social constructionist learning involves "participation in a community of practice" (p. 55). Gherardi (as cited in Chiva & Alegre, 2005) more succinctly described social learning as "a way of being in the world" (p. 55). Over time, these reflections from management theory provided the impetus for professional learning communities in the realm of education.

The Principal Professional Learning Community Model

Through the evolution of national leadership standards and related expectations, the role of the principal has been gradually redefined from an instructional leader with a focus on teaching to that of the leader of a professional community with a focus on learning (National Staff Development Council, 1995, 2001). Central to the PLC model is the importance of learning for the educational staff as both a prerequisite for capacity building and the crucial link to improved student learning (Stoll et al., 2006). Capacity, as defined by Stoll et al. (2006), involves a "complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support" throughout the school community (p. 221).

Stoll et al. (2006) described five key, intertwined characteristics of a PLC evident in the literature. The first is that of shared values and vision. The second involves the collective responsibility for student learning; ultimately, collective responsibility eases the isolation typically identified among teachers. The third characteristic of a PLC is inclusive of (a) reflective professional inquiry, (b) dialogue regarding practice, and (c) curriculum development. The fourth characteristic involves collaborative activity and staff development. The fifth, and final, characteristic of a PLC is the promotion of collective, group learning.

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Stoll et al. (2006) added three specific characteristics of a PLC: (a) mutual trust, (b) respect and support among staff members, and (c) inclusive membership of a school-wide community. Fullan and Miles (as cited in Stoll et al., 2006) noted that, just as found in the organizational realm, a PLC within the educational arena is affected by different patterns and phases of change and that these influences should be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of the model within the setting. As Stoll et al. emphasized, the effectiveness of a PLC is not measured by change in teachers but by the effects on student learning. An indepth understanding of the relationship between teachers' capacity for learning and instructional improvement naturally emphasizes the pivotal role of the principal and substantiates the potential influence of an effective PPLC model across a school district (R. DuFour, personal communication, June 6, 2010).

The School Based Professional Learning Community Model

DuFour (2002) succinctly defined a PLC as a reform model comprised of collaborative teams working interdependently to achieve common goals with the purpose of learning for all. DuFour et al. (2006) further emphasized that goals related to the PLC must focus on learning, as opposed to teaching, and ultimately impact classroom practices. Another identified emphasis was that educators within the learning community must collectively establish a clear and compelling vision for the school as a preliminary step in the establishment of the PLC (DuFour et al., 2006). The importance of effective leadership skills to support the PLC model was also emphasized (DuFour et al., 2006; Sturko & Gregson, 2009; Wells, 2008).

Members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2008) helped to further define and promote the PLC model through the adoption of three standards and

related strategies. Standard 1 establishes the expectation that principals will "Lead

schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center" (p. 20). Identified

strategies pertinent to a PLC include (a) staying informed of changes in teaching and

learning, (b) embodying learner-centered leadership, (c) capitalizing on the leadership

skills of others, and (d) aligning operations to support student and adult needs. Standard 2

states that principals are expected to "Set high expectations and standards for the

academic . . . development of all students" (p. 20); related strategies that reflect the PLC

model include building consensus on a vision that reflects the core values of the school

community as well as developing an innovative and collaborative culture.

Standard 4 establishes the expectation that principals will "Create a culture of

continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals" (National

Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008, p. 21). The four related strategies

collectively support the PLC model: (a) invest in comprehensive professional

development for all adults; (b) align the professional development plan with learning

goals;(c) encourage adults to bring new knowledge and resources to the learning

environment; and (d) provide resources of time, structure, and opportunities for adults to

collaborate for the purpose of improving practice.

The PLC model is viewed as an intentional school-wide reform intervention as well

as a staff development model (DuFour, 2002; DuFour et al., 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2006;

Salina & Traynor, 2009). Popularity of the PLC model has increased over the past decade

because of findings indicating that the integration of the model (a) improves student

performance, (b) contributes to skills development for teachers, (c) increases

collaboration among faculty, and (d) increases teacher retention (Sargent & Hannum,

2009; Sturko & Gregson, 2009; Wells, 2008). Referring to the traditional approach of staff development as a "dog and pony show" (p. 49), Reeves (2002, 2006) urged educational leaders to implement school-wide reform using the PLC model. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) similarly described traditional efforts as "drive-by workshops" (p. 46) and emphasized the need for more indepth preparation if educators are to realize true instructional reform at the school level.

DuFour et al. (2006) described the vital role of the PLC model as the "most promising strategy for helping all students learn at high levels" (p. 1) and further stated that the effectiveness of instruction will measurably improve when educators develop new skills through the hands-on implementation of strategies typically noted in the infusion of the model. Skillful integration of a PLC additionally impacts stakeholders of a school through increased trust, which brings a shift to the school culture (DuFour, 2002; DuFour et al., 2006; Shen, Zhen, & Poppink, 2007). A review of the history regarding the PLC model lends credibility to use of the reform model.

History

Although much of the current PLC literature is dedicated to practices involving teachers' professional development (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012), Barth (1984, 2001) initially encouraged school principals' professional development within collegial communities during the early 1980s. At that time, Barth (1984) was promoting the value of the PLC framework for "principals [who] are voluntarily engaging as learners . . . [and] exercising leadership and ownership in their professional growth" (p. 93). Barth (1984) further stated, "Learning is in and of itself a precious value that too many principals have been deprived of" (p. 94). Although initially focusing on principals, Barth

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was also astutely aware of teachers' need for collegial professional development and was instrumental in promoting components of "advanced collegial work" for the benefits of teachers (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012, p. 4).

The historical context of the teacher PLC model is believed to have its roots in the 1980s with the advent of team teaching and open classrooms (DuFour et al., 2008; Hewson & Adrian, 2008; Hord, 2008; Leon & Davis, 2009; Marzano, 2004; Wood, 2007). Initial teacher meetings occurring during this time focused on activities involving instructional management such as ordering instructional supplies, assigning instructional responsibilities, and scheduling extracurricular activities (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 2008; Leon & Davis, 2009). These shared experiences naturally increased professional interaction, encouraged new ways of thinking, and improved teacher motivation; teachers soon became more motivated, committed, and effective (DuFour et al., 2008). At the time, the meetings were mistakenly considered to be indicative of a PLC model but lacked administrative involvement, whole school reform, and a shared vision that are rudimentary to the PLC model (Barth, 2001; DuFour et al., 2008; Hewson & Adrian, 2008; Hord, 2008; Marzano, 2004; Wood, 2007).

Because of team teaching and open classrooms, however, teachers gradually began to share instructional experiences and engage in collaborative reflection (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 2008). Collaboration again became more significant when academic standards were identified and implemented (Reeves, 2002, 2006). At this juncture, teachers and administrators recognized the need for intentional professional development emphasizing student achievement (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 2008). This understanding evolved into widespread acceptance of the current PLC model emphasizing the role of

research and use of exemplary practices to inform educators (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord, 2008).

Perceived Benefits

The traditional, school based PLC model has been credited with numerous benefits. The research depicting these benefits is primarily qualitative in nature and is based on results derived from case studies or other qualitative examinations of practices. Given the nature of action research, most studies are conducted within one school level, reflecting the various processes and perceptions of a limited number of teachers.

Educators. Because of the many benefits, the PLC model is perceived as an essential element of meaningful school improvement (Barth, 1984, 2001; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). A review of the literature suggests that the use of the PLC reform model (a) improves perceptions of school based educational processes (Quezada, 2004; Ragland, Clubine, Constable, & Smith, 2002), (b) enhances instructional skills (Bertrand, Roberts, & Buchanan, 2006; Hord, 2009; Wells, 2008), (c) improves the collaboration and inquiry processes (Bertrand et al., 2006; DuFour et al., 2006), (d) supports the learning of effective practices (Bertrand et al., 2006; Ragland et al., 2002), and (e) reduces teacher isolation (Barth, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Lujan & Day, 2010; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). These factors, in turn, help to increase commitment to the shared vision and belief system that ultimately improves retention (Bertrand et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour et al., 2006). Through the embedded practices involved in a PLC, teachers also have the opportunity to build leadership capacity (Quezada, 2004; Schlechty, 2002; Wells, 2008).

Students. Students also benefit from the integration of PLC practices which is the

core purpose of the reform model (DuFour et al., 2006). The salient benefit derived from integrating a PLC is improved academic performance (DuFour et al., 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Mokhtari, Thoma, & Edwards, 2009). Through the incorporation of a PLC, a community of learners emerges to help instill excitement and commitment to the learning experience (Leon & Davis, 2009). Use of the model also helps to prepare students for taking standardized tests designed to measure the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions defined in academic standards (DuFour et al., 2006). Benefits derived by students are directly related to the essential components reflected in school practices and embedded throughout the PLC model (DuFour et al., 2006).

Essential Components

Given the complexity of the four components, the PLC model is multifaceted. It is through the infusion of these collective components, however that academic achievement is best supported: (a) establishing the foundation, (b) asking guiding questions, (c) monitoring the learning experience, and (d) identifying and implementing systemic interventions to support academic achievement (DuFour et al., 2006). Each of these essential components is discussed in the following text and depicted in Figure 2.

Establishing the foundation. As delineated by DuFour et al. (2006), the foundation of the PLC model is comprised of its mission, vision, values, and goals. The meaning of each is explored through related questions designed to (a) establish priorities, (b) provide a sense of direction, (c) identify needed commitments, and (d) support collaboration. Answering each of these questions in a collaborative manner is crucial in the establishment of a solid foundation for the PLC (DuFour et al., 2006).

DuFour et al. (2006) clearly defined the foundational components and provided

related questions to help educators identify these components within the setting. The mission, designed for the purpose of clarifying the fundamental purpose of the school, is defined by asking, "Why do we exist?" (p. 23). The vision, useful in identifying the desire regarding what the school should become, is defined by asking, "What must we become in order to accomplish our fundamental purpose?" (p. 24). Values, instrumental in clarifying the commitments educators must fulfill to achieve the vision, are defined by asking, "How must we behave to create the school that will achieve our purpose?" (p. 25). Goals, which are helpful in clarifying measureable targets and identifying related timelines, are defined by asking, "How will we know if all of this is making a difference?" (p. 26).

Asking guiding questions. Critical questions, challenging both assumptions and habits, must be identified in order to lend credibility and integrity to the PLC (Hord, 2008; Salina & Traynor, 2009). DuFour et al. (2006) delineated the purpose of the questions as follows. First, educators must identify the objectives students should master; second, the method by which students will demonstrate achievement of the objectives must be established. Third, educators must identify an alternate approach for those students who do not master the objectives. Fourth, the approach that will be taken once students demonstrate mastery of the objectives must be identified.

Monitoring the learning experience. DuFour et al. (2006) clearly supported the use of common assessments for monitoring the learning experience. The belief is that common assessments incorporate efficiency and effectiveness. They are also useful in informing practices, improving the educational program, and identifying interventions to assist students who are not demonstrating achievement of academic standards. When

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designing common assessments, teachers should (a) demonstrate the alignment of each item with state academic standards, (b) identify the target proficiency standard for each item, (c) correlate formative assessments with standardized tests, and (d) frequently measure achievement of a few key concepts or skills (DuFour et al., 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2006). The role of school administrators throughout this process is to provide support, ensure that teachers are familiar with standardized tests, collaboratively review student performance with teachers, provide rubrics for use with performance-based tests, and contribute examples of effective testing instruments (DuFour et al., 2006).

Identifying and implementing systematic interventions. Numerous researchers have surmised that, even when an effective PLC model is utilized throughout a school, some students will not demonstrate achievement of state standards in one or more core academic subjects (DuFour et al., 2006; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Graham & Ferriter, 2008; Honawar, 2008). DuFour et al. (2006) also expressed the belief that low performing students need additional support, and the purpose of systematic reform centers on the provision of this assistance. Indicating the process should consist of timely and directive support, DuFour et al. emphasized the need to (a) identify interventions and related learning objectives, (b) monitor the impact of the interventions, and (c) make adjustments in the interventions as needed. This process was referenced by Graham and Ferriter (2008) as "differentiating follow-up" (p. 41). Although this is the final essential component of the PLC model, the complexity of the model involves an intense level of collaboration and evaluation of student performance in a continued cycle of school improvement.

National Educational Leadership Standards

As noted in the ISLLC literature, national standards for school leaders were designed

in 1996 and revised in 2008. They were developed to serve as guidelines for use in policy

development at the state and district levels (Council of Chief State School Officers,

2008). The standards, conceptualized and developed through the work of the Council of

Chief State School Officers in 1996, provide much of the language regarding the

effective leadership needed for guiding educators through the cycle of school

improvement.

Guiding Principles

In preparation to draft the standards, seven principles were identified (Council of

Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 7). Because four of those principles are directly

aligned with the PPLC model mandated through district policy in the research setting,

their examination is applicable in this qualitative study. These principles establish the

expectation that educational leadership standards will (a) reflect the centrality of student

learning; (b) acknowledge the changing role of the school leader; (c) recognize the

collaborative nature of school leadership; and (d) be predicated on the concepts of access,

opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community (p. 7).

```
[Mission]        [Values]          [Identify        [Identify
                                     Outcomes]        Objectives]

[Vision]         [Goals]      [Successive            [Alternative
                               Approaches]            Approaches]

    [Establishing the              [Asking Guiding
       Foundation]                    Questions]

              (The PLC Model)

    [Monitoring the            [Identifying and
    Learning Experience]        Implementing
                                Systemic
                                Interventions]

[Common      [Administrative  [Individualized       [Impact of
Assessments]  Role]            Interventions]         Interventions]

                                   [Adjustments to
                                    Interventions]
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Figure 2. Essential components of the professional learning community model (DuFour et al., 2006).

Standard 1

The standard is directly aligned with the PPLC model mandated through district

policy and, consequently, is applicable in the current study. The standard initially stated,

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students

by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision

of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Council of Chief

State School Officers, 1996, p. 8). The standard was later revised to state, "An education

leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation,

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implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by

all stakeholders" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 14). The changes in

wording emphasized the (a) role of the school leader, with the change from a "school

administrator" to an "education leader"; (b) individuality of students, with the change

from "all students" to "every student"; and (c) personalization of the school community,

with the change from "the school community" to "all stakeholders" (Council of Chief

State School Officers, 2008, p. 18).

Knowledge Areas of Educational Leaders

The first ISLLC standard (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996) was further

developed to include specific areas of leadership knowledge. Given the credibility and

application of the ISLLC standards, related areas were identified as significant in the

current study. As delineated by members of the Council of Chief State School Officers

and displayed in Figure 3, principals are expected to have acquired knowledge of (a)

learning goals, (b) the development and implementation of strategic plans, (c) systems

theory, (d) data collection and analysis strategies, (e) communication; and (f) consensus-

building (1996, p. 10).
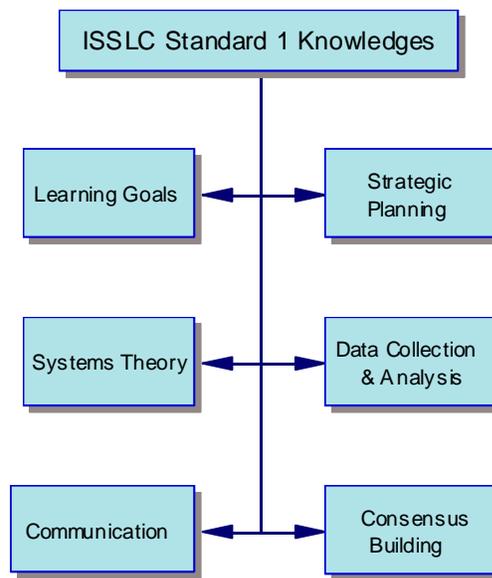
Figure 3. Educational leadership Standard 1 knowledge areas (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Dispositions of Educational Leaders

In continued development and expansion of the ISLLC standards, members of the

Council of Chief State School Officers (1996) identified the need for leadership

dispositions. Council members defined dispositions as those concepts each principal

"believes in, values, and is committed to" (p. 12). Similar to the knowledge expectations,

the majority of these were identified as significant in the current study. As reflected in

Figure 4, dispositions denote that (a) all students are able to be educated; (b) high

standards of learning are incorporated within the school vision; (c) school improvement is

a continuous process; (d) the school community should be inclusive of all members; (e)

all students should be taught the knowledge, skills, and values needed for becoming

successful adults; and (f) one's assumptions, beliefs, and practices should be

continuously examined (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).
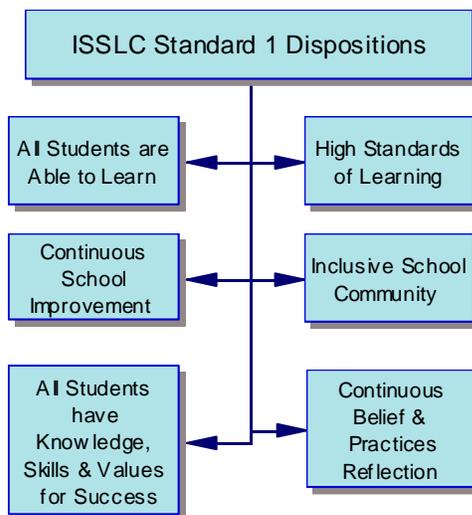
Figure 4. Educational leadership Standard 1 dispositions (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Educational Leadership Skills

In addition to the recommended knowledge areas and dispositions contained in the

ISLLC standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), Reeves (2006)

identified seven skills believed to be "complementary dimensions" (p. 33) of educational

leaders. Similar to the knowledge and dispositions expected of principals, these were

identified as significant in the current study (see Figure 5).

The first skill, *developing a vision*, involves providing commitment to visionary

leadership. Reeves (2006), citing the work of Kouzes and Posner, described this skill as

the ability to challenge the status quo with clear and vivid terminology that articulates

both a compelling vision and standards of action to help achieve the identified vision.

Reeves stated that an effective vision helps to build staff trust and, furthermore, enables

staff members to both know their roles in the vision by understanding their personal

contributions. *Providing relational leadership* is the second of the seven skills. Citing

Goleman, as well as Kouzes and Posner, Reeves stated, "The trust and credibility that

stem from meaningful relationships are essential for leadership success" (p. 39).

Relationship skills include (a) listening, rather than interrupting or prejudging; (b)

respecting confidences; (c) practicing empathy; (d) providing attention, feedback, and

support each person needs; and (e) exhibiting passion and respect for both the school

mission and the staff.

Providing systems leadership is the third skill, and this skill is complex (Reeves,

2006). A principal who has developed strong systems leadership skills understands the

complexity of interactions, as well as their potential effects, throughout the school

community. These interactions then must be explained to staff members to help them

understand and use the interconnections. Reeves (2006) emphasized the importance of

engaging in self-reflection, the fourth skill, by likening it to a preparatory component of

battle. Four activities should be the focus of self-reflection: (a) thinking about lessons

learned, (b) recording both wins and losses, (c) documenting conflicts between values

and practice, and (d) noticing trends that emerge over time. Reeves promoted self-

reflection as the "gulf between the theoretical abstractions of academic leadership

development programs and the daily lives of leaders" (p. 50) and clearly described

reflection as an essential practice for leadership development.

When *promoting collaborative leadership*, the fifth skill, Reeves (2006)

acknowledged the possibility that leadership and collaborative leadership appear to be an

oxymoron. The importance of related skills, however, was promoted through the

following "essential truths" (p. 53): (a) employees are volunteers; (b) although leaders

can make decisions based upon their authority, only through collaboration will the

decisions be implemented; and (c) systemic improvement will only occur through

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networks of individuals. Reeves identified the *ability to analyze problems*, understand the interactions between complex variables, and achieve related conclusions as the sixth of seven key leadership skills. The ability to *identify and persistently ask pertinent questions* is an underlying skill. Reeves identified communication, the final of seven skills, as individualized according to the "complex organization demands" (p. 58). Citing the immense spectrum in audience involving staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders, Reeves encouraged leaders to develop skills in written language and to systematically use electronic formats for reaching all members of the audience. Handwritten, personal notes were also encouraged for use in expressing gratitude and recognition.
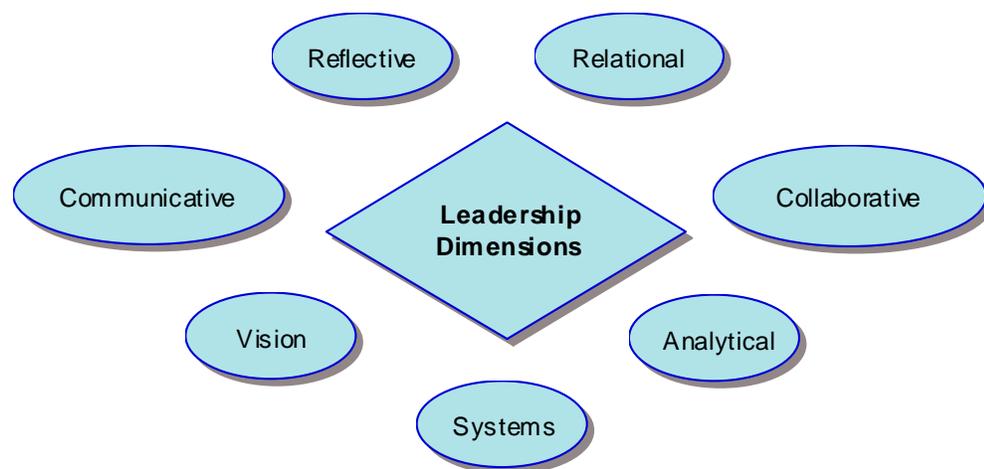
Figure 5. Educational leadership dimensions (Reeves, 2006).

Building Leadership Capacity

Lambert (1998, 2003) identified two critical conditions that must exist if leaders are to develop the capacity that endures the innate challenges of a school setting. First, principals must understand the collective value of the school vision and have the skills for contributing to the integral processes involved in achievement of the vision. Second, principals must be "committed to the central work of self-renewing schools" (p. 4). This

involves skills and participative behaviors such as self-reflection, inquiry, and professional dialogue as noted in the PLC model. These skills and participative behaviors also serve as the major components of Lambert's leadership capacity matrix.

As reflected in Figure 6, the matrix consists of four quadrants (Lambert, 1998, 2003). The first, low participation, low skillfulness, represents a school principal who typically demonstrates the autocratic leadership style. Information usually flows from the principal to the staff, is regulatory in nature, and sets the expectation of compliance. In this situation, the principal depends on teachers to perform as directed, and teachers depend on the principal for guidance. Teachers are rarely innovative and seldom learn new skills. Lambert reported that short term student performance may improve under this style of leadership, but the change is not sustainable.

Quadrant 2, high participation, low skillfulness, reflects a school principal who functions in a "laissez-faire and unpredictable fashion" (Lambert, 1998, p. 14). Information is typically fragmented, and no school-wide focus on teaching or learning exists. Teachers demonstrate individualism with evidence of only minimal innovation in performance. Student performance is static and often reflects low achievement for all student subgroups other than high socioeconomic status, females in lower grades, and boys in higher grades.

Quadrant 3 is labeled high skillfulness, low participation and is used to graph a principal who is making progress in school-wide reform (Lambert, 1998, 2003). A small leadership team of teachers is often developed, and the team is skillful in using student performance data to identify and guide instructional innovations. Strong resistance may be noted among teachers; the resistance, in turn, may minimize the focus on improving

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student performance. The overall result on student performance is similar to that found in Quadrant 2, with both static and limited improvement.

The fourth quadrant, high skillfulness, high participation, is noted when the principal demonstrates inclusive leading and collaboration skills (Lambert, 1998, 2003). Within this quadrant, over half the teachers are involved in leadership by affecting norms, roles, and responsibilities throughout the school. The school-wide focus is not only on student performance but on adult learning as well. Inquiry is used to contribute to the integral processes involved in shared decision making. Overlapping roles and responsibilities are noted, with teachers taking both individual and collective responsibility for school-wide leadership. These factors clearly demonstrate the presence of an effective PLC model, and student performance is consistently high.

	Q3	Q4
High Skill	Traditional Style Limited use of data Teacher Leadership Team Strong Resistance Diminished student performance Static & limited student improvement	Inclusive / Collaborative Style Teacher leadership the norm School focus on students and adults Inquiry process strong Shared decision making Student performance consistently high
	Q1	Q2
Low Skill	Autocratic Style Top down communication Regulatory Compliance Short term improvement Not sustainable	Laissez-faire Style Fragmented Communication No School-wide focus Individualism in performance Minimal innovation Student performance static
	Low Participation	**High Participation**

Figure 6. Leadership capacity matrix (Lambert, 1998, 2003).

Summary

The literature review was used to explore selected theoretical models and professional practices involving the realm of educational leadership. Through the text, support for the use of the school based PLC model as a foundation for designing the PPLC was provided (Barth, 1984, 2001; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). The text presented the four essential components of a PLC in anticipation that the PPLC will embrace these aspects of the model.

The ISLLC standard (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, 2008) pertinent to the study, along with guiding principles, knowledge areas, and dispositions, were also described and discussed. The text additionally incorporated the seven leadership skills, or dimensions, depicted by Reeves (2006) because of their salient role in the study. The final component of the literature review described the leadership capacity matrix (Lambert, 1998, 2003). The following chapter is dedicated to a detailed description of the methodology design and procedures of the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As mandated through district policy, the superintendent developed and implemented a PPLC at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year as the venue through which leadership capacity would be built throughout the school district. Although the initial, school based PLC model was developed and disseminated in the early 1990s (DuFour, 1995, 1997), the value of the school based PLC model for enhancing the development of principals' leadership skills had not been widely promoted. Potential benefits of a PPLC, however, were suggested by Barth several years earlier (1984). Furthermore, the development of a customized version of the school based PLC model to support the professional development of elementary principals was encouraged by R. DuFour (Personal communication, June 6, 2010).

At the time this study was implemented, effects of the PPLC in elementary schools within the research setting were unknown. Because the PPLC was in its infancy, the need existed to identify perceptions related to practical aspects of the phenomena regarding school practices. This study was designed to explore principals' perceptions, knowledge, dispositions, and skill development involving the PPLC. As expected, this examination provided critical information for the use of the superintendent and trustees as they provided continuous leadership within the district. As also anticipated at the onset of the study, an understanding regarding the infusion of the PPLC within the research setting was acquired through the study. Understanding key aspects of related phenomena was useful in identifying viable recommendations for improved district leadership.

Five research questions guided the study:

1. How do participants describe the influences of the PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by Lambert (2003)?

2. How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

3. How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

4. How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)? This question was supported by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a) developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership.

5. What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?

The following text begins with elaboration regarding the appropriateness of the research methodology for use in examining educational practices within the elementary schools. This section is followed with discussion regarding the research design; support for the selected design is also presented. The remaining text was used to provide a detailed description of the various procedures involved in the study.

Research Methodology and Design

The research study was categorized as a nonexperimental methodology. Charles and Mertler (2006), as well as Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), reported that nonexperimental

research is the most common approach used in educational settings. This investigation reflected a qualitative design, incorporated no comparison of separate groups, and included no efforts to determine a cause-effect relationship. Rather, the study was designed to gather qualitative data, used to "capture the human meanings of social life as it is . . . understood by the participants" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2005, p. 201).

Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2004) described qualitative research as a collection of nonnumerical data in the form of narrative, verbal descriptions. Merriam (1998) added that qualitative inquiry, which is conducted in natural settings, is focused on processes rather than outcome. Fitzpatrick et al. (2004) reported that qualitative inquiry is based on two assumptions, with both being closely related to the constructivist philosophy and the family systems theory. The first assumption is that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with social worlds; the second is that meaning is embedded within individual situations (Merriam, 1998).

Participants

Ethnic distribution within the subject school district was 50.9% Hispanic, 34.9% African American, 13.7% Caucasian, 0.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.1% Native American. Approximately 83% of students were economically disadvantaged, and 14.4% were limited in English proficiency. Just less than 10% of students had been diagnosed with disabilities, and almost 70% were classified as at risk of school failure.

Fifteen elementary principals provided leadership within these schools. Ethnic distribution was 73% Caucasian and 27% African American. In terms of administrative experience, four had acquired 5 years or less, six had 6 to 11 years of experience, and the remaining five had acquired 12 or more years. Under the leadership of these principals in

2011, as measured by the Academic Excellence Indicator System, three (20%)

elementary schools were exemplary, five (33%) were recognized, five (33%) were

academically acceptable, and two (13%) were academically unacceptable. The 15

elementary school principals were invited to participate in the study; 14 volunteered by

providing informed consent. Participating principals ranged in age from 28 to 62 years.

Each had acquired classroom teaching experience and held a master's degree; one had

acquired a terminal degree at the doctoral level.

Instrumentation

The data collection consisted of a flexible interview protocol (see Appendix 1). The

questions were intended to acquire participants' reflections pertaining to experiences

within the PPLC and to answer the research questions that guided the study. The design

of the instrument was comprised of tenets involving (a) leadership capacity (Lambert,

2003), (b) the essential components of the PLC model (DuFour et al., 2006), and (c)

ISLLC Standard 1 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). In its final form, the

protocol included seven questions and was administered as a flexible interview. With the

embedded flexibility, participants were encouraged to freely expound upon their

responses for the purpose of embellishing responses with rich language and providing

insightful perceptions that may not be acquired through a structured interview (Gay et al.,

2005; Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2007). Interviews were all completed within 1 hour of time.

Each interview question was designed to acquire responses for answering the

research question:

Research Question 1 asked, "How do participants describe the influences of the

PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by

Lambert (2003)?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Items 1 and 2 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 1 asked, "How often did you participate in the PPLC?" Item 2 asked, "In what administrative skill areas did your PPLC involvement improve your leadership capacity?"

Research Question 2 asked, "How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Items 3 and 4 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 3 asked, "Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your concepts of continuous school improvement?" Item 4 asked, "Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your beliefs and practices?"

Research Question 3 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 5 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 5 asked, "Reflect on your experiences with the PPLC related to continuous school improvement. Provide examples of the ideas and practices that you implemented related to continuous school improvement. What specifically did you take away from the PPLC discussions that changed/improved/detracted from your beliefs and practices?"

Research Question 4 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)?" This question was supported by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a) developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership,

(d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership. This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 6 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 6 asked, "In what areas did participation in the PPLC affect the greatest change in your personal leadership?" Participants were asked to prioritize the list of leadership skills from greatest to least and describe the item identified as Number 1 in terms of characteristics of change.

Research Question 5 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 7 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 7 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?"

Review of advisory panel. The researcher designed the interview protocol and asked members of the advisory panel to review the instrument prior to administration. This procedure was expected to establish the clarity of verbiage and the degree to which the items were appropriate for use in the study. Panel members provided feedback and specific recommendations for revising items that were problematic in wording. The researcher revised those items to reflect the changes.

Field test of the instrument. In an attempt to confirm the degree of effectiveness of the content within the interview protocol, the researcher field tested the instrument with three elementary school principals. With this added measure, the degree of trustworthiness, confirmability, credibility, and dependability of findings was expected to increase (Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2007). In a meeting, the researcher read each item to

principals and asked them to identify any wording they believed may have been either too vague or confusing. They were not asked to respond to the items but, instead, to document feedback regarding each. Principals were also asked to identify any terms that may have required defining on the instrument. The researcher reviewed the feedback and asked for clarification while the principals remained available for discussion. Prior to administering the interview protocol to participants, the researcher revised items based on feedback acquired through this collective process.

Procedures of the Study

Several preparatory procedures were integral to the study. These included recruiting (a) members of the advisory panel, (b) the team of school principals who field tested the data collection instruments, and (c) participants of the study. Following these steps, the interview protocol was administered and member checks were conducted. Procedures are described in detail within the following text.

Recruitment of Members of the Advisory Panel

Four postsecondary educators, employed within the state wherein the researcher resided and personally known to the researcher, were identified to serve on the advisory panel. These individuals provided a measure of credibility to the study, as they were employed in the college of education of an accredited, private university. The age range of candidates was assumed to be between 45 and 60 years; ethnicities were considered irrelevant and were not solicited. Other than their professional roles at the university, no selection methods were applied.

To recruit participants for the study, the researcher telephoned each candidate and requested a personal meeting. When granted, each was individually introduced to the

problem, purpose, and research questions of the study. The researcher then indicated that

the role of panel members involved providing recommendations pertaining to the

usefulness and clarity of items comprising the interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

Candidates were also apprised that their involvement in the study was expected to require

no more than 2 hours of time. These expectations were explained without coercion. All

administrators volunteered to serve on the advisory panel.

Recruitment of Principals for Field Testing the Interview Protocol

Three school principals, employed within the state where the researcher resided and

known to the researcher, served on the advisory panel. These individuals were

professional peers with at least 5 years of experience as elementary school principals. The

age range of candidates was assumed to be between 35 and 50 years. Ethnicities were

considered irrelevant and were not solicited. Other than their professional roles in the

principalship and length of tenure, no selection method was applied.

To recruit participants for the study, the researcher telephoned each principal and

requested a personal meeting. During the meetings, each was individually introduced to

the problem, purpose, and research questions of the study. The researcher then indicated

that the expectation involved reviewing the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) to

identify (a) any wording on the instrument they believed may have been either open to

misinterpretation or redundant, (b) the expected response time for participation, and (c)

any terms that may have required definitions within the instrument. Candidates were also

apprised that their involvement in the study was expected to require no more than 2 hours

of time. These expectations were explained without coercion. All three principals

volunteered to participate in the study by participating in the field testing procedure.

Recruiting Participants and Acquiring Informed Consent

All 15 elementary principals employed in the school district were recruited for voluntary participation in the study; 14 volunteered to participate by providing informed consent. Because no position of authority or supervision existed between the researcher and the principals, the researcher personally recruited participants. Recruitment occurred immediately following a district-wide administrative meeting.

Prior to the meeting, the researcher acquired names and electronic mailing addresses of elementary principals from the school district superintendent; a recruitment flyer was then distributed using these addresses. During the recruitment session, the researcher clearly presented the problem, purpose, and questions of the study. The voluntary nature of participation was also emphasized. Candidates were apprised that their involvement in the study was expected to require no more than approximately 1.5 hours of time. The researcher also provided candidates the opportunity to ask questions, and contact information was provided for their use in seeking clarification at a later time.

Once all questions were satisfactorily answered, an adult/general informed consent document was distributed to the principals. In part, the document assured that no coercion would occur and, likewise, that no impact or penalty on principals' performance evaluations would transpire should they decide not to participate. Candidates were asked to read the consent form and consider volunteering to participate in the study. They were then asked to return their signed consent forms to the researcher by U.S. Postal Service within 1 week if they were willing to volunteer for participation.

Data Collection

The data collection involved conducting the interviews and member checks. These procedures were methodically accomplished as described in the following text. The researcher personally administered the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Interviews were scheduled at the rate of four per day and were conducted at the school of each principal. To devise a schedule that was convenient for participants, an electronic notice was sent for principals' use in selecting appointments (see Appendix 2). While conducting the interviews, only participants' first names were recorded on the written documentation and on the audio tape. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher provided participants the opportunity to make their appointments for member checking to confirm responses were correct and complete.

Creswell (2012) and Glesne (2005) recommended that responses be documented, tape recorded, and transcribed for use in member checking. The researcher conducted member checks within the week following each interview as participants' schedules permitted. Member checks were completed within 1 hour and occurred at the rate of four per day at the school of each principal. To ensure accuracy, principals were provided the typed transcript of their responses to the interview. All responses were confirmed by participants, and several expounded on previous responses. All changes occurred in the presence of participants to further ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

As Creswell (2012) recommended, the researcher (a) analyzed data as they were collected, (b) reflected continuously on the data, and (c) asked analytic questions regarding the data. The researcher also engaged in professional dialogue with colleagues

as recommended by Merriam (1998). Analysis began with the researcher documenting and organizing responses to each item using Microsoft Word software. The data were then inductively analyzed to create analytic files in further development of their organization.

Salient categories and topics were first identified and were given a code number. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) recommended codes such as "subjects' ways of thinking and events" (pp. 172-175) but also emphasized that, because each study is unique, specific codes will need to relate to the unique phenomena examined in each study. As anticipated, the majority of codes pertained to various topics involving participants' perceptions of (a) the PPLC model; (b) leadership performance; and (c) leadership knowledge, dispositions, and skills. As Creswell (2012) encouraged, indepth responses were coded and used multiple times in various units.

Glesne (2005) recommended that results derived from the coding process be grouped into meaningful themes referenced as "data clumps" (p. 135). The next step requires that these themes be woven into interconnecting narratives to form general descriptions of participants' perspectives. Once all of these steps have been completed, results from the analysis were interpreted for use in answering the research questions guiding the study. Additional identifiable patterns and trends were also identified and reported. Findings were documented and used as the basis for supporting related recommendations derived from the study.

Dissemination of Results

Creswell (2012) reported that transferability, or generalizeability, is not typically applicable in qualitative studies. Consequently, the dissemination of results acquired from

this study was limited to individuals within the school district wherein the study was implemented. As envisioned at the onset of the study, results were shared with the (a) superintendent, through the provision of a copy of the final dissertation report and a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation; (b) members of the school board of trustees, through a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation; and (c) principals, using a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. Results are expected to be useful as a component of the current emphasis on leadership development mandated by the trustees of the school board.

Summary

This qualitative study was conducted for the purpose of examining participants' perceptions of various phenomena regarding participation in the PPLC. Identified participants were elementary school principals. Participants' ages ranged from 35 to 60 years, and all had acquired classroom teaching experience. The data collection consisted of an interview protocol (see Appendix 1). The researcher personally administered all interviews, conducted all member checks, and analyzed and interpreted the data. Credibility of findings was increased through member checking and initiating ongoing professional conversations with administrative colleagues.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Influences of the Principal Professional Learning Community

on Leadership Capacity

Research Question 1 asked, "How do participants describe the influences of the

PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by

Lambert (2003)?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 2

of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). Item 1 of the protocol was used, however, as

a method for screening participants.

Item 1 asked, "How often did you participate in the PPLC?" Of the 14 participants,

seven reported attending all meetings, four reported attending all but one meeting, and

one reported attending all but two meetings. Two of the 14 participants stated that only

one PPLC meeting was held during the school year; these participants either chose not to

respond to the remaining interview questions or provided a brief statement such as, "It

didn't impact the school that much." After conducting professional conversations with

colleagues concerning their lack of attendance in PPLC meetings, the researcher made

the decision to exclude responses provided by these two principals from the data analysis.

Item 2 asked, "In what administrative skill areas did your PPLC involvement

improve your leadership capacity?" Data were listed by 10 participants and one provided

rich, thick data; responses were organized into the categories of (a) instructional

leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, (d) student discipline, (e) campus

management, (f) resource management, and (g) district expectations. As Creswell (2012)

suggested, data were coded and used in multiple categories when warranted. As one

participant stated,

> We shared strategies that worked, shared concerns and solicited ideas, got various new perspectives regarding master scheduling, training staff, campus PLCs, and teacher expectations. It helped me to prioritize activities that would directly impact student achievement and balance all other requirements. We helped each other maintain due date calendars and send reminders.

Data organized within the category of instructional leadership, presented in the order of frequency, included analysis of student achievement data, communication, supporting teachers, problem solving, leading conversations on improving student achievement, tutorials, monitoring instruction, planning for success, prioritizing daily activities to improve student learning, identifying teacher expectations, implementing a campus PLC, training staff, guiding teachers using specific questions, and learning from veteran principals.

Data organized within the category of collaboration and presented in the order of frequency included communication, supporting teachers, leading conversations on improving student achievement, planning for success, identifying teacher expectations, implementing a campus PLC, guiding teachers using specific questions, learning from veteran principal, soliciting ideas, shared concerns, and shared strategies.

Data organized within the category of student achievement, presented in the order of frequency, included analysis of student achievement data, leading conversations on improving student achievement, problem solving, Tier 3 response-to-intervention strategies, tutorials, monitoring instruction, prioritizing daily activities to improve student learning, identifying teacher expectations, implementing a campus PLC, and training staff.

Data organized within the category of student discipline included making positive

telephone calls and identifying discipline strategies. Data organized within the category of campus management, presented in the order of frequency, included developing master schedules, problem solving, prioritizing daily activities, campus improvement plans, and school calendars. Data organized within the category of resource management included field trip ideas and sharing resources. Data organized within the category of district expectations, presented in the order of frequency, included district mandates and deadlines, principal evaluation tools, and district goals and procedures.

Research Question 1 asked, "How do participants describe the influences of the PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by Lambert (2003)?" Analysis of responses to Item 1 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) provided the opportunity to screen responses and identify two that were unsuitable for use in this study. Because these two participants only attended one PPLC meeting in the year, their responses were not included in the analyzed data. The remaining 12 participants, however, provided data useful in answering the research question.

Responses to Item 2 were organized into the seven categories of instructional leadership, collaboration, student achievement, student discipline, campus management, resource management, and district expectations. Data were coded and used in multiple categories as warranted. Responses clearly qualified for inclusion within the fourth quadrant of the leadership capacity matrix (Lambert, 1998, 2003). This quadrant is characterized by (a) inclusive leading and collaboration skills; (b) leadership inclusive of norms, roles, and responsibilities throughout the school; (c) a school-wide focus on both student performance and adult learning; (d) the use of inquiry in shared decision making;

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and (e) the overlap of roles and responsibilities through collective leadership

responsibility (Lambert, 1998, 2003). As Lambert (2003) underscored, these

characteristics demonstrate the presence of an effective PLC and are expected to promote

shared decision making and consistently high student performance.

Participation in the Principal Professional Learning Community

Regarding the Guiding Principles of Effective Leadership

Research Question 2 asked, "How do participants describe their participation in

PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by

the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" This question was answered through

an analysis of responses to Items 3 and 4 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

Item 3 asked, "Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your

concepts of continuous school improvement?" One response was provided to this

question. The participant provided rich, thick data by stating,

> For me, as a new principal, it has been very beneficial in tackling issues that face
> those in the principal position on a daily basis. The brainstorming opportunities
> provided me with opportunities to hear different perspectives and to bounce ideas off
> of more experienced principals. Additionally, we had opportunities to help one
> another with challenges, keep abreast of deadlines, etc. and to be a sounding board
> for one another.

Item 4 asked, "Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your

beliefs and practices?" The one response to this question was provided by the same

participant who responded to Item 3. Again, the participant provided rich, thick data by

stating,

> The PPLC improved my beliefs and practices. As our time together has transitioned
> into a well-oiled machine, I have gone from being more of a passive participant to
> honing in on key developmental skills and providing examples, feedback, etc. in
> areas where I feel I may contribute more.

Research Question 2 asked, "How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" Four guiding principles are directly aligned with the PPLC model mandated through district policy in the research setting. These principles emphasize the (a) centrality of student learning; (b) changing role of the school leader; (c) collaborative nature of school leadership; and (d) concepts of access, opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Analysis of the one participant's responses to Items 3 and 4 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) clearly demonstrated initial evidence of the guiding principles in two of the four areas. First, the participant described activities involving the collaborative nature of school leadership. In the beginning of the PPLC experience, the participant indicated a *passive* stance involving *listening* to others' perspectives and *seeking* ideas and advice from veteran principals. Later in the interview, the participant recalled reciprocal exchanges that *helped one another*, leaving the impression of contribution to the professional dialogue. Over time, the participant became more collaborative by *providing examples and feedback* within the communication. The participant additionally demonstrated initial evidence regarding the concept of empowerment through the self-reported confidence involving the ability to *contribute* during the PPLC meetings by "honing in on key developmental skills." The two guiding principles not demonstrated in responses were those involving the centrality of student learning and the changing role of the school leader.

Skills Development

Relating to Standard 1 of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium

Research Question 3 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 5 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

Item 5, Part A, asked, "Reflect on your experiences with the PPLC related to continuous school improvement. Provide examples of the ideas and practices that you implemented related to continuous school improvement." Part B of Item 5 asked, "What specifically did you take away from the PPLC discussions that changed/improved/ detracted from your beliefs and practices?" Data were provided by 10 participants; responses to each part of the question are presented separately in the following text. Data were considered as one unit, however, for use in answering the research question.

Item 5, Part A, asked participants to provide examples of the ideas and practices related to continuous school improvement that they implemented based on experiences with the PPLC. Responses were listed by the majority of participants; they were organized into the five categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, (d) student discipline, and (e) campus management. As Creswell (2012) suggested, data were coded and used in multiple categories when warranted. Several participants provided rich, thick data. As one reported,

> Lead Your School has been a district initiative; however, we within the PPLC have taken the concepts and ideas from our district training and been able to apply and adapt the practices to our unique situations. In addition, because our PPLC is comprised of schools with unique programs or student bodies, we are able to not only focus on what will improve our scores, but what will improve our programs and students as a whole.

Another participant stated, "Through my PPLC, I implemented a data binder with specific forms and questions to get necessary information to improve student performance."

Data organized within the category of instructional leadership included the improvement of programs and students throughout the school, effective instructional strategies, instructional alignment between curriculum and assessment, assessment of what was taught, providing intervention and support for struggling learners, working toward mastery learning, revising school procedures, designing school-wide norms and expectations, program improvement, student improvement, and analyzing performance data,

Data organized within the category of student achievement included improving performance scores, posting student pictures in the hallways, sharing ideas about reading, identifying effective instructional strategies, working on instructional alignment between curriculum and assessment, testing to assess what was taught, providing intervention and support for struggling learners, reteaching and reevaluating, working toward mastery learning, and analyzing performance data.

Data organized within the category of campus management included adjusting paraprofessional schedules, organizing time by using a detailed calendar that can also be used for documentation, revising school procedures, and designing school-wide norms and expectations. Data organized within the category of student discipline included making positive telephone calls and sharing ideas about attendance and tardies. Data organized within the category of collaboration included sharing ideas about reading, attendance, and tardies.

Item 5, Part B, asked participants to describe what they took away from the PPLC discussions that changed/improved/detracted from their beliefs and practices. Responses were listed by the majority of participants; they were organized into the three categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, and (c) student achievement. As Creswell (2012) suggested, data were coded and used in multiple categories when warranted. Several participants provided rich, thick data. As one reported,

> I found the discussions helpful. Sharing practices reassured me that my ideas were valuable, especially if another colleague wanted to implement the practice. I also

> learned better ways to communicate ideas to my teachers so they would buy into change easier.

Another stated, "I was a new principal, so I found myself gaining basic leadership ideas learning from colleagues." A third participant highlighted the support system gained through the PPLC by sharing, "The PPLC provided the opportunity to continuously learn as well as a support system from other administrators." Another participant similarly stated, "I can move forward with my plans with more confidence based on feedback." Two unique thoughts were provided by another participant when stating, "What gets monitored gets done. All children can grow if you provide appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment."

Data organized within the category of instructional leadership included (a) improving communication of ideas with teachers, (b) leading through the change process, (c) gaining basic leadership ideas, (d) increasing confidence based on feedback, (e) monitoring instructional and assessment practices, and (f) providing appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Data organized within the category of collaboration included shared practices,

improved communication of ideas with teachers, support system for leaders, and increased confidence based on feedback. Data organized within the category of student achievement included monitoring instructional and assessment practices and providing appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Research Question 3 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" The first ISLLC standard is directly aligned with the PPLC model mandated through district policy in the research setting. Expectations within this standard emphasize specific areas of leadership knowledge involving (a) learning goals, (b) the development and implementation of strategic plans, (c) systems theory, (d) data collection and analysis strategies, (e) communication, and (f) consensus building.

Analysis of the collective responses to Item 5, Parts A and B, of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) clearly demonstrated initial evidence of skills development in five of the six areas related to this standard. Knowledge involving learning goals was evident in responses regarding (a) improving student performance, (b) providing instructional alignment between curriculum and assessment, and (c) working towards mastery learning. Initial evidence of skills development in the realm of developing and implementing strategic plans was evident in two responses. The first involved the application of concepts and ideas from the district initiative to unique situations in the different schools. The second accentuated the desire to lead through the change process.

Initial evidence of skills development in the area of systems theory was apparent in responses concerning (a) improvement of programs and students throughout the school, (b) school-wide norms and expectations, (c) the revision of school procedures, and (d) the

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PPLC support system. In the area of data collection and analysis strategies, analysis indicates participants were dedicated to conducting assessments of student performance. In the area of communication, participants spoke of sharing ideas and practices about reading, attendance, and tardies. Responses additionally underscored the desire to improve communication among staff and leadership. Evidence of only one expectation, consensus building, was not found in the analysis.

Leadership Skills Development

Research Question 4 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)?" This question was supported by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a) developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership. This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 6 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

Item 6 asked, "In what areas did participation in the PPLC affect the greatest change in your personal leadership?" Participants were asked to prioritize the list of leadership skills from greatest to least and describe the item identified as Number 1, representing the skill wherein the greatest change occurred, in terms of characteristics of change. The 12 participants provided both quantitative and qualitative feedback to this question. The leadership skill receiving the highest rating was that of promoting collaborative leadership ($M =2.5$); the skill receiving the lowest rating was that of developing a vision ($M = 5.4$). Additional areas, in the order of ratings, were (a) engaging in reflective

leadership ($M = 3.3$), (b) providing systems leadership ($M = 3.5$), (c) providing relational leadership ($M = 4.3$), (d) engaging in communicative leadership ($M = 4.5$), and (e) providing analytical leadership ($M = 4.6$).

Descriptions of the skills areas wherein participants perceived the greatest changes in their personal leadership provided rich, thick data. In response to the area of collaborative leadership, the skill that received the highest rating, one participant stated, "The PPLC gave me an outlet for collaboration with peers. It gave me confidence that I could bounce ideas off my peers and know that they are experiencing the same issues as I." Another reported, "I appreciate the 'go to' team approach with the PPLC." A third participant demonstrated more of a systems approach by stating, "Learning from others and working together helps us work smarter and use each other's resources and ideas."

Descriptions of the remaining skills areas, presented in the order of ratings, also provided rich, thick data. In the area of engaging in reflective leadership, one participant reported, "Although I feel I've been a decent disaggregator of data through the years, hearing other perspectives and ideas in a team setting has helped me dig deeper into not only my campus data but the data of the district and state." Another explained,

> After participating in a PPLC, I found it very important to consider the practices I had in place to see if I was achieving the results I desired. I would create a pros-and-cons list to determine if the practice warranted tweaking. Moreover, I found incorporating some of the others' practices made me hold myself more accountable.

In the area of providing systems leadership, one participant stated, "New systems developed and adjusted based upon input and participation." Another said, "By reminding each other of the process of systemic change, I focused more on processes than on people." In the area of providing analytical leadership, a participant reported, "All parts of our system must be analyzed carefully and changes made when necessary."

In reference to the area of developing a vision, a participant said, "I learned that everyone must have input in developing the vision for our campus and everyone must believe the vision can be achieved. There must be buy in and ownership." Participants provided no response to the remaining skills areas of providing relational leadership and engaging in communicative leadership.

Responses were categorized under Reeves' (2006) seven leadership skills areas, based on the ratings, in the order of (a) promoting collaborative leadership, (b) engaging in reflective leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) providing relational leadership, (e) engaging in communicative leadership, (f) providing analytical leadership, and (g) developing a vision. Within the area of promoting collaborative leadership, participants mentioned four leadership practices: (a) collaborating, (b) using a team approach, (c) learning from others, and (d) working together. Within the area of engaging in reflective leadership, participants identified the leadership practices of (a) evaluating, (b) expanding practices based on that of others, and (c) holding themselves more accountable. Within the area of providing systems leadership, participants again indicated the need to evaluate their practices; furthermore, the systemic change process and the importance of focusing on processes instead of people were reported. In the skills area of providing analytical leadership, the importance of evaluating practices was again underscored. In the area of developing a vision, participants emphasized the importance of inclusion, collaboration, and the development of a collective vision.

Research Question 4 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)?" The leadership skill receiving the highest rating involved collaborative leadership, and that area also received the

largest number of responses such as (a) collaborating, (b) using a team approach, (c) learning from others, and (d) working together. Combining data acquired for the remaining skills areas, participants again emphasized their development in the areas of inclusion and collaboration to include the development of a collective vision. Development in the area of evaluation was mentioned three times, within the skills areas of (a) engaging in reflective leadership, (b) providing systems leadership, and (c) providing analytical leadership. Combined quantitative and qualitative responses support that participants' skills were developed within each of the seven leadership areas.

Comparison of Attributes of the Principal Professional Learning Community Model

and the School Based Professional Learning Community Model

Research Question 5 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?" This question was answered through an analysis of responses to Item 7 of the interview protocol (see Appendix 1).

Item 7 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?" Eight participants provided responses to this question. Although five listed the attributes, three others provided rich, thick data. Collective responses were organized into the categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, and (d) campus management. As Creswell (2012) suggested, data were coded and used in multiple categories when warranted.

Data organized within the category of instructional leadership included school improvement, scheduled meetings, established norms, accountability, structure, and

routine. Within the category of collaboration were data reflecting the values of communication, discussion of set topics, shared conversations, shared strategies, and participation. The examination of performance data, which was categorized under student achievement, was identified by one participant. Another participant provided a response that was categorized under campus management and described the PPLC as an experience that teachers may have had in the school-based PLC.

One participant expounded on the response by stating, "I joined the PPLC after the initial establishment but realize the value of the structure in creating an environment where discussions are targeted on set topics." A second participant provided rich data by reporting, "Through my personal experience, I could see where teachers may not connect to the process and then I was able to change my school PLCs to ensure they were successful." A third participant emphasized the perceived value of the PPLC by stating, "I continue to value the PPLC on a daily basis."

Research Question 5 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?" This question was answered by comparing participants' responses to a school based PLC reform model. DuFour (2002) described a PLC reform model as an opportunity for collaborative teams to work interdependently to achieve common goals with the purpose of learning for all. Additional emphases of a PLC reform model include (a) establishing a clear and compelling vision (DuFour, 2006), (b) applying effective leadership skills (DuFour et al., 2006; Sturko & Gregson, 2009; Wells, 2008), (c) setting high standards for achievement (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008), and (d) creating a culture of continuous learning (National Association of Elementary School

Principals, 2008).

Responses related to this research question were sorted into the categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, and (d) campus management. Without delving into the lists within each category, it was apparent that the primary attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model. The primary emphasis of participants' responses, however, appeared to embrace the collaboration and overall learning that occurred; this is directly reflective of DuFour's (2006) description of a PLC reform model. Perhaps the response to this research question is best captured by one participant's words, "I continue to value the PPLC on a daily basis."

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study involved an integral examination of leadership development within an urban, southern school district with an enrollment of approximately 15,170 students. The 27 district facilities included 15 elementary schools; the principals of 14 elementary schools (93.3%) volunteered to participate in the study. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year, trustees serving on the school board mandated the establishment of a PPLC throughout the district. There was no formalized framework specifically designated for principals. The superintendent was responsible for providing training and guidance to the school principals in support of the collaborative inquiry processes inherent to the PPLC. Through the concerted efforts of the trustees and superintendent, it was anticipated that participation in the PPLC would position principals for improving individual and collective effectiveness.

The problem this study addressed was that various phenomena pertaining to the implementation of the PPLC, as perceived by the principals, had not been examined to determine their influence. The need existed to identify perceptions related to practical aspects of the phenomena regarding school practices, as the traditional PLC model was not designed for enhancing leadership capacity of principals (R. DuFour, personal communication, June 6, 2010). Determining related influences of the PPLC represented an opportunity to identify and provide essential information to trustees for their use in making subsequent leadership decisions. This study describes the integral processes of establishing the initial principal PPLC but was also designed to explore principals' perceptions regarding various influences of the initiative.

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Of primary importance to this qualitative study was the dialectical perspective of constructivism, which reflects the belief that social influence, such as peer collaboration, promotes the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). As Jacobsen et al. (2006) emphasized, a constructivist learning environment facilitates learning through self-reflection and emphasizes the role of prior understanding as a key component in the learning process. Because the PPLC model incorporates factors of collaboration, self-reflection, and the critical role of prior understanding, constructivism was an appropriate choice of conceptual framework for this study. This belief was succinctly supported by the research of Stoll et al. (2006) who underscored the role of inquiry, self-reflection, and self-evaluation in the school improvement process. The study was guided by five research questions:

1. How do participants describe the influences of the PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by Lambert (2003)?

2. How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

3. How do participants describe their skills development in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?

4. How do participants describe their skills development in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)? This question was supported by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a) developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical

leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership.

5. What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?

Discussion of Results

Influences of the Principal Professional Learning Community on Leadership Capacity

Research Question 1 asked, "How do participants describe the influences of the PPLC model in terms of their ability to increase leadership capacity as described by Lambert (2003)?" To answer this research question, participants were asked to identify areas of administrative skills wherein participation in the PPLC improved their leadership capacity. Through interview responses, participants indicated improved capacity in the areas of instructional leadership, collaboration, student achievement, student discipline, campus management, resource management, and district expectations.

Responses clearly qualified for inclusion within the fourth quadrant reflecting high skillfulness, high participation within the leadership capacity matrix. This quadrant is characterized by (a) inclusive leading and collaboration skills; (b) leadership inclusive of norms, roles, and responsibilities throughout the school; (c) a school-wide focus on both student performance and adult learning; (d) the use of inquiry in shared decision making; and (e) the overlap of roles and responsibilities through collective leadership responsibility (Lambert, 1998, 2003). As Lambert (2003) underscored, these characteristics demonstrate the presence of an effective school-based PLC and are expected to promote shared decision making and consistently high student performance throughout the school community.

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A review of the collective responses further supports the belief that leadership capacity was impacted in areas participants felt were lacking in their daily practices. This finding is consistent with the tenets of the adult learning theory, underscoring the beliefs that adults engage in learning with various experience bases and a readiness to learn "those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 67). The PPLC also provided regular opportunities for principals to share ideas and thoughts with their colleagues. Through the PPLC, veteran principals were able to discuss ideas, problems, and thoughts while considering solutions to unique problems affecting their school communities. The dialogue with veteran principals was also helpful to novice principals, suggesting that all members of the PPLC benefitted from participation.

Participation in the Principal Professional Learning Community Regarding the Guiding Principles of Effective Leadership

Research Question 2 asked, "How do participants describe their participation in PPLC activities regarding the guiding principles of effective leadership as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" To answer this research question, participants were asked to examine changes in their concepts, beliefs, and practices involving continuous school improvement that may have occurred as a result of participating in the PPLC. The four guiding principles of effective leadership are directly aligned with the PPLC model implemented within the research setting, as these principles emphasize the (a) centrality of student learning; (b) changing role of the school leader; (c) collaborative nature of school leadership; and (d) concepts of access, opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community (Council of Chief State School

Officers, 1996).

Analysis of the one participant's response clearly demonstrated initial evidence of the two guiding principles involving the collaborative nature of school leadership and the concept of empowerment. This is demonstrated through the participant's response, "I have gone from being more of a passive participant to honing in on key developmental skills and providing examples, feedback, etc. in areas where I feel I may contribute more." Although one response is far from conclusive, the self-reflection and confidence noted in the participant's words did provide viable support to the continuation of the PPLC in the research setting.

The two guiding principles not directly validated in the participant's response were those involving the centrality of student learning and the changing role of the school leader. Because only one response was provided to assist in answering this research question, data were extremely limited. Responses dedicated to answering other research questions, however, clearly indicated that participants recognized and were vested in the centrality of student learning, the third of the four guiding principles (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Determining the number of years each participant had served in the principalship was beyond the scope of this study, yet that information may have contributed to an understanding of whether participants viewed the role of the school leader as one of change, the fourth guiding principle (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Skills Development Relating to Standard 1 of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium

Research Question 3 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development

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in the areas relating to ISLLC Standard 1 as identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996)?" To answer this research question, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences within the PPLC related to continuous school improvement and to provide examples of the ideas and practices they had implemented.

The first ISLLC standard is directly aligned with the PPLC model as implemented within the research setting. Expectations within this standard emphasize specific areas of leadership knowledge involving (a) learning goals, (b) the development and implementation of strategic plans, (c) systems theory, (d) data collection and analysis strategies, (e) communication, and (f) consensus building (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Analysis of the data clearly demonstrated initial evidence of skills development in all areas with the exception of consensus building. Furthermore, attainment of this expectation was not demonstrated in responses to any of the interview questions.

When participants provided examples of the ideas and practices related to continuous school improvement that they had implemented based on experience derived from the PPLC, responses reflected practices in the five categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, (d) student discipline, and (e) campus management. One participant also made connections between the district training initiative and the PPLC by reporting that practices highlighted in the district training had been adapted and applied to affect the change process in the assigned school. This is critical information, given that Standard 1 promotes both the success of every student and the facilitation of a vision of learning (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

When asked to identify and describe what they took away from the PPLC

discussions, responses were appropriate for organization within three categories: (a)

instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, and (c) student achievement. Several of the

responses involving instructional leadership and collaboration clearly qualified for

inclusion in both categories. Based on responses, it was evident that time spent with other

principals had been beneficial in refining daily practices and implementing student

achievement initiatives.

As noted in these responses and to others involving the collective research questions,

a very individual impact occurred from participating in the PPLC. Through interactions

with other principals, participants were able to identify and improve their weaknesses and

glean strategies for making positive changes in their school communities. Furthermore,

participants' confidence increased as they reaffirmed their beliefs and expanded their

daily practices with recommendations on how to better communicate with staff. Through

self-reflection, time spent with other principals was beneficial in refining daily practices

and identifying initiatives to improve student achievement. These findings affirm the

tenets of constructivism stating that peer collaboration and language are critical in the

learning process (Meece, 2002).

Leadership Skills Development

Research Question 4 asked, "How do participants describe their skills development

in the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006)?" This question was supported

by seven subquestions asking how participants describe their skills development in (a)

developing a vision, (b) providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership,

(d) engaging in reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing

analytical leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership. To answer this

question, participants were asked to identify areas wherein participation in the PPLC affected the greatest change in their personal leadership. Participants were asked to prioritize the list of leadership skills from greatest to least and to then describe the item identified as Number 1 in terms of characteristics of change.

The leadership skill receiving the highest rating involved collaborative leadership; responses reflected actions such as collaborating, using a team approach, learning from others, and working together. Participants emphasized their professional development in the areas of inclusion, collaboration, and evaluation; one additionally stated that participation in the PPLC provided the opportunity to increase accountability of the principalship. Combined quantitative and qualitative responses support that participants' skills were developed within each of the seven leadership areas identified by Reeves (2006).

Promoting collaborative leadership and engaging in reflective leadership were two important areas that leaders felt were foundational within their PPLC. Principals were seeking ways to be collaborative in a profession that tends to be isolated. The researcher found that it was imperative for individuals to be given the time and opportunity to share ideas and get feedback in order to make changes prior to sharing with their staff members. Giving principals time to collaborate enabled them to problem solve and create solid innovative ideas. Participating in the PPLC enabled them to experience what their own teachers were experiencing as they endeavored to participate in school-based PLCs.

Comparison of Attributes of the Principal Professional Learning Community Model and the School Based Professional Learning Community Model

Research Question 5 asked, "What attributes of the school based PLC model were

incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?" To answer this question, participants were asked to identify the attributes of the school based PLC model that were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model. Participants identified shared attributes within the categories of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c) student achievement, and (d) campus management. Based on findings, it was apparent that the primary attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model. The primary emphasis of participants' responses, however, appeared to embrace the collaboration and overall learning that occurred; these aspects are clearly reflective of a PLC reform model. One participant reported, "Through my personal experience, I could see where teachers may not connect to the process and then I was able to change my school PLCs to ensure they were successful." In layman's language, experiencing the PPLC gave principals an opportunity to walk their talk.

Conclusions

A PLC model was described in the literature as an *intentional* school-wide reform as well as a staff development model (DuFour, 2002; DuFour et al., 2006; Reeves, 2002, 2006; Salina & Traynor, 2009). The PPLC model initiated in the research setting shared the attribute of intention through regular meetings providing principals opportunities for collaboration and feedback. By participating in the PPLC, principals were also afforded opportunities to share ideas, forge professional relationships, and shape visions for their school communities. As discussed in the following text, findings from this applied research study support the continuation of the PPLC.

Through the self-reflection related to participation in the interviews integral to this

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study, participants shared perceptual data indicating numerous benefits derived from the PPLC. First, participants improved their leadership capacity in the seven areas of instructional leadership, collaboration, student achievement, student discipline, campus management, resource management, and district expectations. Consequently, findings point to the belief that participants reflected the attributes of high skillfulness and high participation within the leadership capacity matrix described by Lambert (1998, 2003). These attributes are expected to promote shared decision making and consistently high student performance throughout the school community (Lambert, 1998, 2003).

A second benefit derived from participation in the PPLC was that leadership capacity was impacted in areas participants felt were lacking in their daily practices. This finding is consistent with the tenets of the adult learning theory and underscores the beliefs that adults engage in learning with various experience bases and a readiness to learn information and develop necessary skills to effectively perform their professional roles (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 67).

Participating in the PPLC also provided regular opportunities for principals to share ideas and thoughts with their colleagues. Through the PPLC, veteran principals were able to discuss ideas, problems, and thoughts while considering solutions to unique problems affecting their school communities. The dialogue with veteran principals was also helpful to novice principals, suggesting that all members of the PPLC benefitted from participation.

A fourth benefit of participating in the PPLC was the attainment of skills within three of the four guiding principles of effective leadership identified by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996): (a) the collaborative nature of school leadership, (b)

empowerment, and (c) the centrality of student learning. The fourth guiding principle involves the role of the school leader as one of change (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Because determining the number of years each participant had served in the principalship was beyond the scope of this study, it remains unknown whether results derived from the PPLC were reflective of this fourth guiding principle of effective leadership.

Participation in the PPLC additionally assisted principals in developing skills in the ISLLC Standard 1 related to continuous school improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Expectations within this standard emphasize specific areas of leadership knowledge involving (a) learning goals, (b) the development and implementation of strategic plans, (c) systems theory, (d) data collection and analysis strategies, (e) communication, and (f) consensus building (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Analysis of the data clearly demonstrated initial evidence of skills development in all areas with the exception of consensus building. In support of this belief, participants provided examples of the ideas and practices related to continuous school improvement that they had implemented based on experience derived from the PPLC. This is critical in participants' professional development, as Standard 1 promotes both the success of every student and the facilitation of a vision of learning (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

A sixth benefit of participating in the PPLC was that a very individual impact occurred. Through interactions with other principals, participants were able to identify and improve their weaknesses and glean strategies for making positive changes in their school communities. These interactions increased participants' confidence, helped them

reaffirm their beliefs, and gave them the necessary skills to expand their daily practices

using recommendations to improve communication with staff. Through self-reflection,

time spent with other principals was also beneficial in refining daily practices and in

identifying initiatives to improve student achievement. These findings affirm the tenets of

constructivism by supporting the role of peer collaboration and language in the learning

process (Meece, 2002).

Participating in the PPLC also assisted participants in further development in all of

the seven leadership skills identified by Reeves (2006): (a) developing a vision, (b)

providing relational leadership, (c) providing systems leadership, (d) engaging in

reflective leadership, (e) promoting collaborative leadership, (f) providing analytical

leadership, and (g) engaging in communicative leadership. When rating the leadership

skills they felt were most promoted through the PPLC, participants identified the skill of

collaborative leadership. Participants additionally emphasized their professional

development in the areas of inclusion, collaboration, evaluation, and increased

accountability. Combined quantitative and qualitative responses support that participants'

skills were developed within each of the seven leadership areas identified by Reeves

(2006).

Responses further indicated that the initial PPLC, as implemented in the research

setting, was reflective of four attributes comprising the school based PLC model. Noted

categories were identified as those of (a) instructional leadership, (b) collaboration, (c)

student achievement, and (d) campus management. The primary emphasis of participants'

responses, however, embraced the collaboration and overall learning that occurred. This

finding was profound, given the belief that the principalship is a position, in many ways,

of isolation. Through participation in the PPLC, one participant gleaned ideas for improving a school-based PLC.

Conclusions drawn from the study reflect that principals are faced with unique and ongoing challenges. Through continued participation in the PPLC, veteran and novice principals alike have an opportunity to continually increase leadership skills and improve practices. Considering the novelty of the PPLC model in the research setting, the researcher concludes that principals have made memorable strides in their skills development as a result of their participation. Principals participating in this study understand how regular PPLC activities can enhance their leadership practices at a time when their skills must change and grow in reflection of their unique school communities. Participants also realize the need to continue efforts to develop collaborative learning communities and integrate what they have learned about leadership in identifying and achieving a vision of learning for all members of their school communities. Through their participation in the initial PPLC, these principals have a profound opportunity to minimize the current silence involving the profound benefits of the PPLC and to continue improving their leadership practices by choosing to assist in the ongoing development of the initiative for the benefit of all learning communities throughout the district.

Limitations

Five limitations were identified during the design and implementation phases of this study, and each had the propensity to jeopardize the validity of the research:

1. The researcher developed the interview protocol (see Appendix 1) specifically for use in this study. Review by members of the advisory panel and field testing by a team of principals were conducted to determine needed revisions. Although these safeguards

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were expected to establish the clarity and appropriateness of items, this limitation may have jeopardized the internal validity of the study.

2. Emotions, judgments, experiences, and preferences of participants occurring beyond the scope of the study may have influenced reported perceptions. This limitation may have jeopardized the internal validity of the study.

3. The study was not designed to evaluate the effects derived from the implementation of the PPLC model within the school district but, instead, to explore various phenomena involving participants' perceptions of (a) the PPLC model; (b) changes in leadership performance; and (c) changes in leadership knowledge, dispositions, and skills.

4. The integral procedures of the study did not include a component for measuring changes in student performance which may have been attributable to the implementation of the PPLC or related changes in instructional leadership practices. This limitation may have jeopardized the internal validity of the study.

5. The transferability, or generalizeability, of the study may have been limited by the fact that this was a study regarding phenomena in one school district as perceived by participants.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on findings of this research study, the researcher recommends the ongoing development and implementation of the PPLC in the school district serving as the research setting. The researcher additionally recommends this study be replicated at the end of a 3-year period, the minimum period which should be sufficient to demonstrate a trend (Creswell, 2012), and that findings be compared to those derived from the current

study to determine whether participants' perceptions of related phenomena have changed. Once results are derived from the recommended study, a determination can be made whether to continue the PPLC. If continuation of the PPLC is warranted, a determination can then be made whether results can be generalized to other Title I school districts.

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This interview will seek your perceptions regarding various phenomena pertaining to the implementation of the principal professional learning community (PPLC). The purpose of the interview is to identify findings that may explain influences and practical aspects of the phenomena as they affect your abilities to guide staff through the integral processes of a PPLC.

Directions: Please answer each question as completely as possible, and feel free to expand upon the questions as you desire.

Thank you very much for participating in this study!

Interview Protocol

Principal Professional Learning Community

Principal Name_____

Current School_____   Years at School_____

Years as Principal_____

Please reflect on the following questions based on your experience with the Principal

Professional Learning Community (PPLC) in your district.

1. How often did you participate in the PPLC?

2. In what administrative skill areas did your PPLC involvement improve your leadership capacity? Give specific examples.

3. Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your concepts of continuous school improvement? Explain in detail.

4. Did your participation in the PPLC change/improve/detract from your beliefs and practices? Give specific examples to expand your answer.

5. Reflect on your experiences with the PPLC related to continuous school improvement. Provide examples of the ideas and practices that you implemented related to continuous school improvement. What specifically did you take away from the PPLC discussions that changed/improved/detracted from your beliefs and practices?

6. In what areas did participation in the PPLC affect the greatest change in your personal leadership? Prioritize the following list from greatest to least. Then, describe the item identified as Number 1 in terms of characteristics of change.

_____ Developing a Vision
_____ Providing Relational Leadership
_____ Providing systems leadership,
_____ Engaging in reflective leadership
_____ Promoting collaborative leadership
_____ Providing analytical leadership
_____ Engaging in communicative leadership

7. What attributes of the school based PLC model were incorporated in the development and application of the initial PPLC model?

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW APPOINTMENT NOTICE

This note is in reference to the research study regarding the principal professional

learning community. Please reply by indicating three choices of days and times you are

able to participate in the interview. The interview will be held at your school and is

expected to require no more than 1 hour of your time. Thank you!

Available appointments:

Week 1:	Week 2:
Monday, _____ ___, 2012	Monday, _____ ___, 2012
Tuesday, _____ ___, 2012	Tuesday, _____ ___, 2012
Wednesday, _____ ___, 2012	Wednesday, _____ ___, 2012
Thursday, _____ ___, 2012	Thursday, _____ ___, 2012
Friday, _____ ___, 2012	Friday, _____ ___, 2012

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