

ABSTRACT

LOVETT, HELEN TOMLINSON. Beginning High School Teachers' Perceptions of Involvement in Professional Learning Communities and its Impact on Teacher Retention. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli).

The purpose of this study was to examine beginning high school teachers' perceptions of involvement in Professional Learning Communities in southeastern North Carolina and to determine whether beginning teachers' perceptions of involvement in Professional Learning Communities influenced their decisions to move to another location, stay in teaching, or leave the profession altogether. This study examined the perceptions of novice high school teachers whose school was functioning as a Professional Learning Community to determine how beginning teachers' decisions were influenced by their perceptions of involvement with Professional Learning Communities.

The researcher used qualitative methods of research that included interviews, analysis of content and document analysis that was later utilized to interpret, analyze and present data. Eight beginning teachers were interviewed in a southeastern high school in North Carolina. The interviews were one on one and face to face. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed flexibility during the interview process. Recording devices were used to record the interviews and the researcher also engaged in note taking. Participants' responses were coded and analyzed and resulted in the emergence of patterns and themes. The process used in collecting data provided for anonymity of all participants.

This study adds to the body of literature as it relates to beginning teachers' retention rates and how beginning teachers involvement with and perceptions of Professional Learning Communities influence retention and attrition issues. Information gleaned from the study

may be helpful to educational leaders and policy makers as they seek solutions and engage in establishing policies and procedures related to teacher retention.

Beginning High School Teachers' Perceptions of Involvement in Professional Learning
Communities and its Impact on Teacher Retention

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Helen Tomlinson Lovett is a native New Yorker and attended public schools in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating from high school, Helen was employed by the State of New York Attorney General's Office for four years until she decided to further her education. She received her Bachelor's of Science degree in Political Science from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. While working for International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), Helen attended North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina, and completed a Master's of Arts in Counselor Education in 1995. She worked as a counselor in Wake County Public Schools for twelve years. Helen completed a Master's of Educational Leadership at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, accepted a position as assistant principal in Johnston County in 2004, and returned to Wake County Public Schools in 2006 as an assistant principal. While enrolled in the Educational Administration and Supervision doctoral program at North Carolina State University, Helen continued her work as an assistant principal in Wake County Public Schools. Helen and her husband Allan currently reside in Raleigh, North Carolina, and are parents of adult children Penny Renee Lovett and Allan Mitchum Lovett, II.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Keeping well qualified teachers in American public school classrooms has been discussed on the national level for the past two decades (Buckley, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001a; Rosenholtz, 1989; Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006). Nationally, teachers leave the classroom at an average rate of 13.2 percent annually, and the percentage of beginning teachers who leave is between 40 and 50 percent during their first five years of teaching (Cook & Engel, 2006; Imazeki, 2005; Reed, Ruben, & Barbour, 2006). Until recently, it was assumed that the primary reason for teacher shortages has been due to increased student enrollment and aging teachers who are approaching retirement age. However, Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) suggest that hiring more teachers will not solve the teacher retention problem. Rather than continuously hiring new teachers, educational leaders should examine teacher attrition issues, especially among new teachers, specifically at the beginning of their teaching careers.

The inability to keep well qualified teachers in American classrooms is viewed as one of the primary causes of inadequate academic performance in schools. Reports of teacher shortages also cause public concerns that American students will be ill-prepared to compete on a global level. While addressing both the problem of teachers leaving and the impact on students, Tamir (2009) adds:

In this grim reality of “revolving doors,” of “graying and diminishing” teaching cadres, of good intentions, and little stability and quality, children’s capacity to learn effectively is restricted, especially as studies show that in order to become effective,

teachers need to stay in the classroom for several years while receiving meaningful induction support. (p. 667)

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 addresses the goal of having well qualified teachers in public school classrooms and established a mandate that all teachers become highly qualified by July 1, 2006. Public concerns of teacher preparedness and qualifications to teach core subjects are addressed in NCLB (Spradlin & Predergast, 2006).

Concerns regarding recruitment and retention of teachers are also expressed in a report from the Congressional Research Service (2005) that addresses programs at the federal, state, and local government levels designed to address issues of teacher retention. More specifically, federal funding for Title II for programs such as Troops to Teachers and Transition to Teaching are designed to address teacher retention issues at the national level.

Members of the business community also have a vested interest in having qualified teachers in classrooms, since business must have students who will graduate and be prepared to meet future employment requirements. In the interest of assuring student readiness, businesses as stakeholders are involved in school reform efforts. Business led school reform efforts are not new in education. For example, International Business Machines (IBM), Microsoft Corporation, and SAS Institute are examples of businesses that have been actively involved in sponsoring and financing programs aimed at reforming public schools.

The High Five Regional Partnership for High School Excellence (High Five) is another example of an organization of businesses involved in school reform in central North Carolina. High Five is involved by promoting and supporting high school reform in Chapel

Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Durham Public Schools, Johnston County Schools, Orange County Schools, and Wake County Public School System (WCPSS).

High Five is comprised of five businesses, namely Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, Capitol Broadcasting Company, Inc., the *News and Observer*, Progress Energy, and SAS Institute. The faculty and administration of all five school districts attended a High Five School Convocation that was held on August 22, 2005 in the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. This meeting introduced the High Five initiative and presented the program to faculty and administration in all five participating districts.

The vision, goals, and initiatives of High Five were presented as follows:

Vision: All students graduating with high school diplomas, well prepared to pursue higher education and careers of their choice.

Goals:

- 100 percent graduating high school by 2013.
- 90 percent completing college tech prep or college/university prep course of study by 2009.
- 80 percent course requirements for University of North Carolina system admission by 2009.

Initiatives:

- Facilitate collaboration between the school districts.
- Identify best practices in high school reform and collaborate on those practices.
- Identify alternative learning environments and course delivery systems and develop standards for them.

- Promote partnerships[s] with families, communities, businesses, the State Board of Education, and local higher educational institutions.
- Promote state policy review and modifications to support student success.
- Identify and obtain financial resources to support reform. (High Five handout August 22, 2005).

After presenting its Operating Plan Summary, High Five introduced its “Key Strategies for increasing Student Achievement” (High Five Handout August 22, 2005) and specified the three primary areas of focus towards enriching high schools as being:

- Enhancing instructional strategies
- Assisting with the redesign of school structures and
- Improving community support of families and schools (High Five Handout August 22, 2005).

One of the school districts participating in the High Five initiative has chosen to focus on strategies to recruit and retain a “highly qualified workforce”. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) reform is in keeping with that strategy (High Five Handout August 22, 2005). Recruiting and retaining teachers is aligned with the High Five initiative to redesign high schools and requires that professional development be embedded in the schedule during the school day.

Additionally, instructional practices will be research based and teacher collaboration will play a major role in student improvement. Also, school level and district level efforts toward professional development will be aligned with greater implementation involving a focus on “rigor, relevance, and relationships” components that will be promoted within high

schools (High Five Handout August 22, 2005). The Rick DuFour PLC model was also introduced through the High Five initiative. As a basic premise related to effective schools, DuFour and Eaker (1998) maintain:

If schools are to be significantly more effective, they must break from the industrial model upon which they were created and embrace a new model that enables them to function as learning organizations. We prefer characterizing learning organizations as “professional learning communities” for several vital reasons. While the term “organization” suggests a partnership enhanced by efficiency, expediency, and mutual interests, “community” places greater emphasis on relationships, shared ideals, and a strong culture - all factors that are critical to school improvement. The challenge for educators is to create a community of commitment - **a professional learning community**. (p. 15)

As described by DuFour and Eaker (1998), shared mission, vision, and values are characteristics of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), along with collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, and continuous improvement. The mission statement should represent what the school believes and stands for; the vision statement should contain what the school sees itself as becoming; and the value statements express the level to which school members are committed to go in order to facilitate improvement in their school.

PLCs as a reform initiative is described by DuFour (2004) as setting its goal to “focus on learning rather than teaching, [promoting teachers to] work collaboratively and [to] hold

[themselves] accountable for results” (p. 6). Teacher collaboration is one of the major foundational aspects of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative. Changes in teacher collaborative efforts may help to facilitate the move from failing in isolation and has the potential to cause a paradigm shift in the approach that teachers bring to work. Beginning teachers could benefit from PLCs in moving from the isolation of their classroom to a collaborative model since all teachers are expected to ensure student learning regardless of their level of experience. Big ideas related to student learning are also an integral part of the DuFour model and are embedded in a PLC school’s culture. Big idea number 1 is designed to ensure that students learn; the number 2 big idea ensures a culture of collaboration; and big idea number 3 ensures a focus on results (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Upon examining PLCs as an education reform, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) published an article entitled “Professional Learning Communities can Drive Instructional Change” in its *Newsletter* dated February 2007. In further clarifying a description of PLCs, the NCDPI states:

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are school staffs that share a mission, vision, values and goals and are characterized by collective inquiry, action orientation, collaborative teams and continuous improvement. PLCs are oriented toward learning, rather than teaching, and are focused on results rather than process. (p. 4)

According to NCDPI, when schools function as PLCs, there is a change in the school’s culture that ensures teachers’ knowledge and understanding of student expectations, effective monitoring systems, and systems that offer additional support to students as needed. Other

areas of focus include an appropriate school schedule, collaboration between teachers, data driven decisions, strong supportive leadership, and professional development. As educators focus on these critical elements of instructional change, PLCs may offer opportunities for sustained school-wide improvement.

Statement of the Problem

Adequately staffing elementary and secondary classrooms with qualified teachers is a topic of discussion that has received attention since the early 1980's. In response to staffing concerns, several national reports such as the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) and the National Academy of Sciences (1987) warned of possible severe shortages of teachers in the coming decades. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002), approximately 33 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first three years and approximately 50 percent leave within five years. Additionally, attrition rates for teachers entering the profession through non-traditional or alternative pathways are as high as 60 percent.

Kearney (2011), while discussing challenges related to recruiting and maintaining new teachers, reminds us that "the strategies needed to retain veteran teachers might well be the same as those to retain teachers new to the profession" (p. 2) especially if we have concerns about retaining veteran teachers at high-poverty schools.

While addressing concerns that teacher shortages are caused by increased numbers of teacher retirements and student enrollments, Brown and Schainker (2008) contend that "as birth rates increase, immigration flourishes, class sizes decrease, and retirements loom (i.e., 37% of teachers are over the age of 50), many school districts in the United States are

struggling to find qualified applicants to teach in their classrooms” (p. 13). Furthermore, Brown and Schinker advise that specific disciplines such as “math, science, and bilingual and special education remain persistently hard to fill, and schools serving high-poverty student populations continue to experience high rates of teacher turnover. Moreover, new teachers are exiting the profession at a brisk rate” (p. 13).

Miller (2010) refers to “teaching [as] a revolving door profession” (p. 2) where teachers are constantly moving in and out of the profession. Miller also contends that experienced teachers who are eligible to retire and beginning teachers are the two groups who comprise the fastest growing attrition rates.

Although current retirement trends may not pose an immediate problem with respect to school staffing, Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley (2006) discuss the age factor as it relates to teachers’ decisions to remain or stay and the ‘U-shaped pattern’ that represents the teaching cycle of teachers who leave and those who remain. The data includes information on “both attrition and mobility” (p. 186) and is analyzed through lenses of “attrition versus age and experience” (p. 186).

Of special interest are the baby boomer teachers, teachers who were born between 1946 and 1964 (Botwinik & Press, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) “more people were 65 years and over in 2010 than in any previous census” (p. 1). This group currently comprises 53 percent of the current teaching force, and are age 50 or older (Carroll, 2009) and will be eligible for retirement in the next five to ten years, thus creating a substantial shortage of well qualified teachers. As stated by Carroll, (2009) “Replacing 1.7

million veteran teachers, including many of our most accomplished educators, with green recruits is neither educationally sound nor economically viable” (p. 10).

As stated by the United States Department of Labor (2010) “as baby boomer generation approaches retirement, there is concern that its departure from the labor force will cause a shortage of teachers in America’s schools” (p. 77). Aaronson and Meckel (2009) also discuss the impact of baby boomer retirement and “estimate the number of new full-time public school teachers needed from 2009 through 2020 will be between 2.3 million and 4.5 million” (p. 1). Further, Aaronson and Meckel (2009) developed a model that projects a total of “303,000 new hires by 2020-21 or 3.5 million for all school years between 2009-10 and 2021-21” (p. 2) in order to address overall teacher turnover needs. Moreover, the years 2010 through 2020 will bring about the largest number of teacher retirements “than in any other decade since the end of World War II” (Aaronson & Meckel, 2009, p. 2). Clearly replacing retired veteran teachers with new and inexperienced teachers may have an impact on the quality of teaching and student learning.

According to a report from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) entitled “North Carolina’s Equity Plan for Highly Qualified Teachers” (2010) North Carolina also has a growing concern regarding teacher retention and “in line with national statistics, North Carolina loses almost 50% of its new teachers within five years” (p. 10). Further North Carolina educational leaders expect to hire 11,847 teachers by 2010 and anticipate a need to hire “nearly 13,000 in the next five years” (p. 2). The NCDPI also reports that “on an annual basis, North Carolina hires approximately 11,000 – 12,000 new teachers. These teachers are needed not only because of student growth, but to replace teachers LEAs

[Local Education Agencies] lost due to retirement, other opportunities, and teacher working conditions” (p. 9).

Likewise, on the district level, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) has over 9,000 regular classroom teachers according to its “Comprehensive Annual Financial Report” (2011) and serves 143,299 students in grades kindergarten through grade twelve. In a report titled “The Strategic Plan for the Wake County Public School System Vision 2017” (2012) WCPSS projects that “over the next five years 6.7 percent of our teachers and 12 percent of our principals will be eligible for full retirement. In addition, our district continues to grow, adding between 3500-5000 students annually” (p. 16) thus states WCPSS , “we will need more qualified teachers and administrators in place to fill these vacancies and to keep up with growth in the system” (p. 16). Unquestionably, the need to *recruit, train, and retain* teacher’s takes on greater urgency as high attrition rates continue to plague the teaching profession.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perceptions of beginning high school teachers in a school in southeastern North Carolina who are involved with PLCs and to determine whether beginning teachers’ perceptions of PLCs influence their decision to remain in teaching, move to another location or leave the profession. This approach to qualitative case study as supported by Merriam (1998) will examine the following two research questions that frame this study:

1. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of Professional Learning Communities?

- 1A. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of mentoring in Professional Learning Communities?
2. How are beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities?

Definition of Terms

Attrition: Ingersoll and Smith (2003) define attrition as those who leave teaching altogether.

Migration: Migration is defined as those who move to teaching jobs in other schools (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Professional Learning Community: The very essence of a professional learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student, and is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Teacher turnover: Wishart (2010) defines turnover “as the loss of teachers through any avenue including attrition (leavers), and those who transfer between schools (movers)” (p. 21).

Significance of the Study

The significance of retaining well qualified teachers in classrooms and educating children is a serious matter and has strong future implications for a democratic society. It is imperative that American students remain competitive in a global economy. When schools experience high attrition rates students are most affected; high turnover rates diminish both the quality of teaching and student achievement (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2002).

Teacher turnover is costly; each time a teacher leaves the estimated cost related to attracting new teachers is approximately \$11,500 as reported by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. This is in addition to the loss of quality teachers in every classroom as well as continuity of staff within the school. Between 15 percent and 20 percent of teachers leave their classrooms on an annual basis and teachers having less than three years leave at a higher rate (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004). Another consideration involves the community's interest in low turnover rates and high teacher retention.

Preparation for the country's workforce begins in the classroom, and when teachers are successful, that translates to success for students and the community. When considering the effect of high school dropouts on its local economy, Wake County in North Carolina estimates that over a lifetime high school graduates earn approximately \$280,000 more than students who dropped out of high school. Additionally, several studies show a high correlation between crime rates and students who drop out of high school. In Wake County public schools the cost of educating a student is \$6,810.00 annually, while the cost of maintaining an inmate in the state prison system is \$21,141. Lucidly educating the student is a wiser investment for the community (Report from the Wake Task Force on Teaching Excellence, 2005). Teachers play a pivotal role in helping students realize their potential and in helping students prepare for the responsibilities that await them.

Although much research has focused on teacher attrition and retention, these areas of study have not been examined in the context of PLCs, neither has the impact of PLCs on issues relating to teacher attrition and teacher retention received extensive attention in the research. If one of the goals of PLCs is to engender greater opportunities for collaboration among

teachers, then it is reasonable to posit that beginning teachers, who often lack the necessary professional skills and who often fail in isolation, may benefit both professionally and personally from working in PLCs. This, in turn, may affect their sense of efficacy and beliefs about teaching. Additionally teachers may gain a greater sense of commitment to their profession that may have an impact of lowering attrition and increasing retention.

Organization of the Study

In Chapter II, a review of the relevant research is presented with a historical view of teacher turnover and literature on Professional Learning Communities in schools. The research methodology is described in Chapter III. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study drawn from data collected through documents, interviews, and field notes at one selected high school in southeastern North Carolina. Chapter V discusses the findings of the study related to the literature review and concludes with implications for further research and practice.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Strategies to maintain teachers in American public schools has become “an issue of national concern” (Jalongo & Heider, 2006, p. 379) in light of the alarming rate at which teachers are either transferring to other schools or districts, or in many cases leaving the profession all together (Billingsley, 2004; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Kelly, 2004; Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Although teachers enter the workforce in increased numbers yearly, greater numbers of teachers are leaving at a faster rate than they are replaced (Watlington et al., 2004). When comparing teaching with other professions, the attrition rate for teachers is disproportionately higher than in other professions; this is particularly true with novice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Harris & Adams, 2007; Liu & Meyer, 2005). With a consistent loss of teachers, an increase in student population, and baby boomer retirements lurking, the shortage problem will be exacerbated (Hussar, 1999; Liu & Meyer, 2005). As stated by Corbell, Osborne, and Reinman (2010) the retention rates of beginning teachers are of particular concern since up to 30 percent of new teachers leave during their first three years of teaching and close to 50 percent leave within five years. Corbell et al. (2010) contend that teachers in the areas of mathematics, science, and special education have an even greater turnover rate.

The ongoing saga of recruiting, training, and retaining teachers has not addressed the retention problem and educational leaders are seeking different alternatives to address the teacher turnover issue. Professional Learning Communities may offer support to beginning

teachers relative to meeting the needs of new teachers. It is also necessary to examine a school's organizational factors in seeking to understand how beginning teachers view their school and classroom experiences. This chapter will review research on teacher retention and attrition, school organization, and the role of Professional Learning Communities in schools. An organizational perspective will serve as a guiding framework from which to integrate relevant literature.

An analysis by Ingersoll (2009) for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) gives a snapshot of the aging teacher workforce on a state by state basis. More specifically the median age of the entire teaching force as well as the median age for "the youngest 25 percent" (p. 2) and "the median age of the oldest 25 percent" (p. 2). For example, in North Carolina the median age for the younger teachers or those falling in the "lower quartile" (p. 37) is 32 years and the median age for North Carolina teachers in the "upper quartile" (p. 37) is 50 years. The median age for all North Carolina teachers is 42 years of age. In interpreting the graphs, Ingersoll (2009) cautions readers to:

Take note of sharp increases for particular age groups:

- Spikes that occur above age 45 should be noted, as they signal a likely wave of retirements within the next decade.
- Bimodal spikes – below age 30 and above age 45 – should also be noted, as they show a significant portion of the state's teaching workforce in the two most vulnerable areas of the teacher pipeline:
 - a) At the early end, where attrition risk is greatest; and
 - b) The late end, where retirement is a near-term prospect. (p. 2)

While North Carolina teachers meet the upper end spike age, the State barely misses the lower spike by two years, and this may signal a need to also keep a close watch on its youngest teachers as well.

Parker, Ndoye, and Imig (2009) remind us that “despite the reasons involved for attrition, it is imperative that school administrators not only employ, but retain quality and effective teachers in every classroom” (p. 329). In seeking solutions to teacher turnover, factors such as teacher job satisfaction (Liu & Meyer, 2005) and low salaries (Darling-Hammond, 2003; may shed light on the problems. Liu and Meyer (2005) have determined that a link exists between teachers’ satisfaction with their jobs and teacher attrition. Woods and Weasmer (2004) assert that strategies designed to increase job satisfaction could play a role in increasing teacher retention. Beginning teachers’ dissatisfaction with compensation contributed to more than 75 percent of departure rates from the profession. And teachers’ salaries were, on average, some 20 percent lower when compared to professionals whose positions require similar credentials (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Perceptual Tradition

An understanding of how teachers perceive their workplace may help shed light on teacher movement in and out of school organizations. While exploring the topic of teacher perception, Schmidt (2007) discusses the perceptual tradition and states that “perceptual tradition places high value on human perception as a vehicle by which people draw conclusions and make everyday decisions. As part of that process, people form expectations about situations and relationships based on experience and knowledge” (p. 18). Furthermore, according to Purkey and Novak (1996) “perceptions serve as a reference point for behavior.

They influence the memories people use to understand the present and anticipate the future” (p. 23). Carolan’s (2008) dissertation from North Carolina State University adds that “the perceptual tradition seeks to understand human behavior from the perspective of a person’s own personal and unique experiences” (p. 52).

Moreover, Purkey and Schmidt (1987) describe fourteen assumptions that are basic in understanding the concept of perceptual tradition:

1. There may be a preexistent reality, but an individual can only know that part which comprises his or her perceptual world, the world of awareness.
2. Perceptions at any given moment exist at countless levels of awareness, from the vaguest to the sharpest.
3. Because people are limited in what they can perceive, they are highly selective in what they *choose* to perceive.
4. All experiences are phenomenal in character. The fact that two individuals share the same physical environment does not mean that they will have the same experiences.
5. What individuals choose to perceive is determined by past experiences as mediated by present purposes, perceptions, and expectations.
6. Individuals tend to perceive only that which is relevant to their purposes and make their choices accordingly.
7. Choices are determined by perceptions, not facts. How a person behaves is a function of his or her perceptual field at the moment of acting.

8. No perception can ever be fully shared or totally communicated because it is embedded in the life of the individual.
9. ‘Phenomenal absolutism’ means that people tend to assume that other observers perceive as they do. If others perceive differently, it is often thought to be because others are mistaken or because they lie.
10. The perceptual field, including the perceived self, is internally organized and personally meaningful. When this organization and meaning are threatened, emotional problems are likely to result.
11. Communication depends on the process of acquiring greater mutual understanding of one another’s phenomenal fields.
12. People not only perceive the world of the present but they also reflect on past experiences and imagine future ones to guide their behavior.
13. Beliefs can and do create their own social reality. People respond with feelings not to ‘reality’ but to their perceptions of reality.
14. Reality can exist for an individual only when he or she is conscious of it and has some relationship with it. (p. 30)

Meanwhile, research has shown that “teachers with positive perceptions about their working conditions are much more likely to stay at their current school than educators who are more negative about their conditions of work, particularly in the areas of leadership and empowerment” (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007, p. 14). And according to Ladd (2011) “like most other workers, teachers make their decisions about whether to remain in their current jobs based on both the level of compensation and on the quality of the work environment”

(p. 235). Furthermore, Ladd (2011) states that her examination of teacher surveys and other data from administration sought to determine “the extent to which teachers’ perceptions of their working conditions are predictive of their intended departures from schools, independent of other factors that may also predict departure, including the racial or socioeconomic mix of the school’s students” (p. 235). A study by Algozzine, Grees, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007) examines how teachers perceive induction programs and discusses how teacher perceptions can influence teacher behavior.

In keeping with the purpose of capturing beginning teachers’ perceptions of PLCs, this research will attempt to capture teacher’s perception through the use of interviews. On the topic of interviews Patton (2002) states:

The purpose of interviewing, then is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories. (p. 341)

Beyond gathering and analyzing data from teacher interviews, beginning teachers’ responses to questions relative to decisions to move, stay, or leave are important in this study.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF, 2002) states that retaining qualified teachers in American public schools has reached a critical point and that “teacher retention has become a national crisis” (p. 21). Despite the belief that teacher retirement is to blame for the high rate of teacher turnover, NCTAF (2002) contends that non retiring teachers leave the profession at a rate three times greater than teachers who leave for reasons of retirement.

Wynn, Carboni, and Patall (2007) indicate that teacher turnover rates fall under two categories: 1) attrition or teachers who chose to leave the profession; and 2) migration, teachers who move to teaching positions in different schools and districts. Regardless of the reason for leaving a school, teachers must be replaced and such replacements cause a disruption to the school's organization and may contribute to discontinuity in student learning. As viewed from the labor market, teachers represent a large portion of the total labor force. When excessive turnover rates are considered along with the rate that teachers tend to flow in and out of schools, teaching staffing problems will arise (NCTAF, 2002). As a possible strategy, alternative routes of teacher certification are being used to help address teacher retention issues.

Alternative Certification Programs

Alternative route certification programs (ARCs) are also in response to high attrition and “evolved during the 1980s, in New Jersey, Texas and California, in response to the projected teacher shortage and in defence [defense] of the epidemic issuance of emergency certificates” (Easley, 2006, p. 241). According to Feisritzter (2005) some 538 ARCs are in existence and have produced almost 35,000 teachers throughout the nation. Easley expands on the ARCs by stating:

ARCs are guided by various theories-of-action which propose that talented mid-career changers will be attracted to teaching due to the fast-track process towards gaining access to the classroom while receiving economic subsidization; candidates will be more willing to teach in urban areas; and candidates' content area background

and work-life experiences will better prepared them for teaching in hard-to-fill content areas such as mathematics and science. (p. 242)

In a study at Mercy College that was designed to determine the intentions of ARC participants to remain in or leave teaching, according to Easley (2006), “77% of the respondents in this study indicated a desire to remain in teaching, 8% were undecided and slightly more than 15% indicate an unlikelihood to remain” (p. 243). These figures are consistent with national data regarding teachers that indicate 62 percent of teachers in the ARC program intend to remain in teaching (Feistritzter, 2005).

Alternative certification programs (ACPs) also came about as states were attempting to respond to teacher quality requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act. Consequently, such ACP programs “often admit recruits before they have completed, or sometimes even begun, formal preparation for teaching” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 37). While Darling-Hammond articulates the necessity and importance of ACP programs as a way to offer entry to opportunities for recruits from other career paths, Darling-Hammond cautions that the preparation programs vary in terms of quality with some of the programs preparing potential teachers with only weeks of training during the summer months. Often, states Darling-Hammond, “these programs end up disrecruiting potentially great teachers instead of recruiting them” (p. 37). Others (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005) indicate differences between general university preparation programs and ACPs as being: a) length and structure of the program, b) the delivery mode, and c) the candidate population. Rosenberg and Sindelar further suggest that the previously mentioned three factors that

determine how ACP programs vary from traditional preparation programs may be used to determine the extent to which a program is alternative.

Former First Lady Laura Bush (White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers, 2002) supports alternative certification programs such as: 1) Teach for America, 2) The New Teacher Project, 3) Troops to Teachers, and 4) Transition to Teaching. Recruits from alternative programs often address specific staffing needs of inner-city public schools that are otherwise difficult to staff. In addition to focusing on college students, Mrs. Bush encourages other professionals and retired military personnel to join the teaching force and to bring their varying experiences and talents into American classrooms in response to the need to produce in excess of two million teachers during the next decade. In order to attract recruits into classrooms, educators must find ways to provide incentives and offer enticing opportunities to draw potential candidates into the teaching field.

Retention rates for teachers completing ACPs require examination, as some 30 percent of teachers in ACPs leave teaching within the first three years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), and the national rates for teachers in ACPs have an annual attrition rate from 8 percent to 12 percent (Feistritz, 2005). Fowler (2008) describes participants in the Massachusetts Initiatives for New Teachers (MINT) program as having attrition rates of over 44 percent over a three year period; and attrition rates of over 50 percent were reported for ACP candidates in Houston and New York after recruits have served three years in the program. In addition to high attrition rates, candidates from ACPs have been reported as being less effective than candidates completing traditional programs (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb,

& Wyckoff, 2006; Darling- Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Helig, 2005; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008).

Addressing North Carolina's Teaching Fellows Program as a model that can both "simultaneously improve teacher competence and retention and meet pressing supply needs in hard-to-staff urban and rural locations", Darling-Hammond (2007) states:

One of the most successful teacher recruitment initiatives over two decades is the **North Carolina Teaching Fellows program**. Funded by the state legislature since 1986, the Fellows program provides \$26,000 in service scholarships (\$6500 per year for four years) to 500 high-ability high school seniors a year who enroll in intensive four year teacher education programs throughout the state, selected for their quality and augmented with additional training. The Fellows must teach for at least four years in North Carolina schools. The programs has supplied over 8,000 teachers for the state's schools, a disproportionate share of whom are males, members of underrepresented minority groups, and in high-need fields like math and science. An evaluation following Fellows over seven years found that 75% were still teaching in the public schools in the state, and many of the remainder had advanced to educational leadership position in schools or districts. (p. 3)

Another successful model for alternative certification is the teacher residency program that pairs lateral entry teachers in paid apprenticeships along with mentor teachers for a period of one year while the candidates complete required coursework at a participating university. After starting their teaching careers, the candidates also received two additional years of mentoring. Upon completing the program, participants are required to spend a

minimum of four years teaching in the district. Exceptional retention rates of over 85 percent are reported for graduates who have taught for a minimum of four years in large cities such as Boston, Chicago, and Denver (Berry, Montgomery, & Synder, 2008). Clearly, efforts are necessary to create, modify, or replicate models of alternative certification programs in an effort help address the issues of teacher retention.

Quality Teachers in Classrooms

One of the most urgent and challenging problems for American educators involves the unequal distribution of quality teachers in American classrooms. High-quality teachers are particularly sparse in schools that teach minority and poor children, and less qualified teachers are disproportionately represented in schools serving non-white and poor students (Murnane & Steele, 2007). Additionally, teacher turnover rates also persist in schools serving poor and minority children and inexperienced teachers are often ill-equipped to handle the demands required for effective instructional delivery in challenging schools (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

The research of Sanders and Rivers (1996) determined that the results of teacher effectiveness can have an enduring as well as a cumulative effect in advancing the achievement of students or leaving students behind. Furthermore, students having comparable achievement levels initially can have significantly differing outcomes based on the assignment of teachers and the sequencing of those teachers. The importance of having highly effective teachers, as determined by Saunders and Rivers, showed that 5th grade math students who had three effective teachers scored at least 52 to 54 percentile points greater than students who had three less effective teachers during the same time period. Students in

both groups were identified as having the same achievement levels before entering the second grade. African American students experienced gains at rates of almost three times that of white students, even when students who are compared to each other have the same previous school achievement records. The value-added model developed by Saunders and Rivers allowed student learning to be measured against individual teacher effectiveness. Teachers were grouped together into quintiles that were determined by students' achievement, thereby allowing student outcomes to be determined by teachers to whom they were assigned (Saunders & Rivers, 1996).

Another value-added model study was conducted in Chicago that examined eighth and ninth grade mathematics standardized scores and focused on linking students and teachers with outcome data. Araronsen, Barrow, and Sanders (2007) determined "that the standard deviation in teacher quality is at least 0.13 grade equivalents per semester" (p. 97). Therefore, "over two semesters, a one standard deviation improvement in math teacher quality translates into an increase in math achievement equal to 22% of the average annual gain" (p. 97). Clearly, teacher quality and effectiveness deserves attention relative to enhancing student achievement and closing persistent academic achievement gaps between high performing and less than high performing students.

Research by McKinsey and Company (2007) in a report entitled "How the World's Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top" involved studying the top twenty-five schools in the world in an effort to find a common denominator. Upon completing the study McKinsey and Company made the following observation:

The experiences of these top school systems suggest that three things matter most:

- 1) Getting the right people to become teachers,
- 2) Developing them into effective instructors and,
- 3) Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. (Executive Summary Section, para. 4)

After singling out children of Singapore as one group of the top national performers, the McKinsey report noted that from a financial perspective, the amount Singapore spends on primary education is less than 27 out of the 30 countries that were examined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through its organization, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Hiring the top recruits and ensuring their professional development appears to be a major component of the reported success of Singapore and other top performing world school systems such as South Korea, Finland, and Hong Kong.

As educators consider the current age of globalization where teacher preparation must include “skills to teach students to the highest standards,” Darling-Hammond (2005) suggests that efforts to improve education for teachers in the United States have created opportunities for refinement of their craft, however “systemic reform has proved elusive” (p. 237). Additionally, the significance of retaining highly qualified teachers is stressed in several prominent educational reforms such as in the No Child Left Behind Act (NLCB) that requires schools to hire teachers who are highly qualified is indicative of needed reform. Darling-Hammond (2005) further suggests that looking at our international counterparts may prove beneficial while seeking reform to enhance teacher quality.

Teacher Turnover Trends

The staggering numbers at which teachers either leave the profession or transfer to other schools or districts has become a plaguing problem in American schools. According to Carroll (2007), the teacher dropout rate has increased by 50 percent, with a national average of 16.8 percent and greater than 20 percent in urban schools. The cost is astronomical, costing upwards of \$7 billion per year, in addition to affecting the quality of teaching, and also interfering with efforts to close the achievement gap. Thomas Carroll of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future warns:

Until we recognize that we have a retention problem we will continue to engage in a costly annual recruitment and hiring cycle, pouring more and more teachers into our nation's classrooms only to lose them at a faster and faster rate. This does and will continue to drain our public tax dollars, it will undermine teaching quality, and it will most certainly hinder our ability to close student achievement gaps. (p. 1)

For example, 919 beginning teachers accepted positions in Philadelphia in 1999, and during the same juncture 12,000 freshmen enrolled in the ninth grade. According to the United States Department of Education (USDOE) only 30 percent of the beginning teachers were still teaching after six years, while 58 percent of the ninth grade students had graduated, thus yielding a 70 percent drop-out rate over six years for new teachers and a 42 percent dropout rate over four years for students. While both percentages are alarming, quality teachers must remain in American classrooms, and retaining beginning teachers is mandatory if students are to be taught well.

Financial Implications of Teacher Turnover

Financial implications are also a factor to be considered when considering low retention and high turnover rates for teachers in American public schools. For example, the Charlotte Advocates for Education is an organization that operates out of Charlotte, North Carolina, and on February 14, 2004 the organization issued the following news release:

Last year approximately 1,230 teachers (16.7% of the teaching force) left Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS). Each time a teacher leaves, \$11,500.00 is needed to recruit, hire and provide orientation and professional development for the replacement. Thus in economic terms alone, these 1,230 teachers who left last year equate to \$14.2 million. The cost to students is even higher with the lack of stability and the loss of teaching expertise. In economic terms alone, were CMS to reduce the rate from 16.7% to 10%, the staggering \$6 million could be spent in meaningful ways to improve student achievement. (p. 1)

Another study by Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer (2007) involved researching turnover information for different cities and focused on the cost of teacher turnover in five districts.

The researchers found:

In both small and large districts . . . the costs of recruiting, hiring, and training a replacement teacher are substantial. In Granville County, North Carolina, the cost of each teacher who left the district was just under \$10,000. In a small rural district such as Jemez Valley, New Mexico, the cost per teacher leaver is \$4,366. In Milwaukee, the average cost per

teacher leaver was \$15,325. In a very large district like Chicago, the average cost was \$17,872 per leaver. The total cost of turnover in the Chicago Public Schools is estimated to be over \$86 million per year. It is clear that thousands of dollars walk out of the door each time a teacher leaves. (pp. 4-5)

Further, as reported by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2008), costs associated with replacing teachers in public schools exceed \$84.5 million annually. When teachers transfer to public schools within the state, the cost is estimated to be approximately \$188.5 million per year; and this amount does not consider costs associated with replacing retirees. While costs associated with high rates of attrition vary considerably (Barnes et al., 2007), it is obvious that teacher turnover is costly, and solutions designed to address retention issues are needed.

Reasons Teachers Leave

In a longitudinal study conducted by Johnson and Birkeland (2003), fifty beginning teachers stated reasons for leaving were driven by teachers seeking basic resources such as classroom materials. In addition to basic resource requirements, the surveyed teachers also sought schools whereby they were made to feel professional and where they would experience collegiality and a sense of respect from school leadership and administration. Still, while focusing on new teachers who left after their first years of teaching and using the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and supplemental information from the Teacher Follow up Survey (TFS), Ingersoll and Smith (2003) sought to understand high attrition among beginning teachers. Data provided by SASS/TFS was the result of surveys from the National

Center for Education Statistics and represents the most extensive set of information concerning teachers, staffing, and organizational and occupational aspects of schools. Beginning teacher exit interviews for the TFS of teachers who left after their first year of teaching expressed reasons for leaving as being “School staffing action (18.9 percent); Family or personal (42.0 percent); To pursue other job (38.8 percent) and Dissatisfaction (28.9 percent)”. Approximately 19 percent of beginning teachers left as a result of staffing matters such as layoffs, cutbacks, building reorganization, or termination. Personal reasons such as pregnancy, health issues, family relocations, and decisions to remain at home with children comprised 42.0 percent.

According to Smith and Ingersoll (2004) the largest category of attrition falls under job pursuits and accounted for about 39 percent of teachers who leave, and about 29 percent for job dissatisfaction. Teachers who cited “dissatisfaction with teaching as a career or with their specific job [as] a main reason [for leaving]” (p. 32) accounted for slightly more than two-thirds of novice teacher attrition. The 29 percent of teachers who listed job dissatisfaction were given an opportunity to share more specific information on the survey and provided the following information:

The survey asked the 29 percent who listed job dissatisfaction as a major reason for leaving about the source of their dissatisfaction, again giving them the option of listing up to three reasons. More than three-fourths linked their quitting to low salaries. But even more of them indicated that one of four different school working conditions was behind their decision to quit: student discipline problems; lack of support from school

administration; poor student motivation; and lack of teacher influence over school wide and classroom decision making. (p. 32)

Science and mathematics secondary teachers have a greater likelihood of leaving the teaching profession than elementary teachers according to a longitudinal study conducted by Henke, Zahn, and Carroll (2001). Moreover, in a study conducted by Henke et al. (2001) involving over “700 college graduates in the 1994 and 1997 waves of the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, the study found that first-time teachers in 1994 who had majored in engineering, math, or natural science” would be “less likely” to be teaching in 1997; as compared to teachers who were education majors, who had a 30 percent rate of attrition versus a 14 percent attrition rate for teachers who “majored in education” (p. 187).

Liu and Ramsey (2008) observed that early research failed to establish teacher mobility relative to teachers moving from school to school, thereby omitting mobility information from the data and was caused primarily because the information was collected in one place. Additionally, previous research failed to include “teacher turnover as a function of school condition and school characteristics” (p. 1174). With a change in focus, recent studies have started to place more emphasis on “school conditions and characteristics” (p. 1174). Teacher morale and commitment to stay have been improved by such factors as “teacher autonomy, administrative support, fewer student problems and teacher involvement in school governance” (p. 1174). When seeking to understand which “unfulfilled needs persuade teachers to leave the field and which job conditions leave them satisfied or dissatisfied, [and] understanding the multiple determinants that lead to teachers’ job satisfaction” (p. 1174), researchers and educational leaders may discover the catalyst to address the retention

problem. Seeking explanations from an organizational perspective may help shed light on reasons teachers transfer, migrate, or leave the profession altogether.

Principal Leadership

Lack of administrative support is reported by teachers as the number three reason that teachers consider leaving the profession and follows salary and student behavioral concerns (Brill & McCartney, 2008). Teachers who actually transferred were seeking new work environments in which they could feel like professionals, were able to share ideas with colleagues, and simultaneously experienced respect and guidance from the principal (Wynn, Carboni, & Patall, 2007). Smith (2009) also reminds us that “there is growing acknowledgement that today’s principal must be willing to learn along with everyone in the building, to be the lead learner” (p. 3). According to Hirsch and Emerick (2007) teachers who had a positive perception regarding their working conditions were more likely to remain at their present school than teachers whose perceptions were negative and these observations were greatest in leadership and empowerment.

Working conditions are related to the role of the principal and are generally broken down into five general categories: use of time; facilities and resources; leadership; empowerment of teachers; and professional development (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007). Starting in 2005, North Carolina teachers were given an opportunity to share their perceptions of their working conditions by participating in a state-wide survey. A portion of the survey was designed to capture information deemed critical to lowering attrition and increasing retention. Effective leadership, according to teachers surveyed in North Carolina, was a major working condition factor that affected teacher retention.

Working conditions also vary substantially between urban and suburban areas relative to administrative support with urban teachers reporting receiving far less support from principals and parents. Urban teachers report further having to work with inferior materials and also having greater student behavioral problems (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; MetLife, 2005). Research also reports that teachers cited principals as being unresponsive (Jalongo & Heider, 2006) and of not providing adequate administrative support (Brill & McCartney, 2008) as being reasons teachers leave. Further, teachers who were in jeopardy of leaving were also likely to cite dissatisfaction with their relationships with their principal, parents, and students as factors affecting their decision to leave teaching (MetLife, 2005).

Organizational Factors

Moreover, while attempting to understand the behaviors of teachers and their views on factors that influence the decision to stay or leave teaching, it is necessary to focus not only on the personal characteristics, such as age (Feng, 2006) and field of specialty, but also on other factors related to turnover that have not previously received focus. For example, Guarino et al., (2006) used data from the Schools and Staffing Survey from during the 1980s and 1990s and determined that:

large schools had lower turnover rates than small schools. In addition [they] found that wealthier schools and rural schools tended to experience less teacher turnover than poorer or urban schools[;] [further that] private schools had higher annual turnover rates (18.9%) than public schools 12.4%). The bulk of the difference was due to attrition from teaching; both private and public schools lost teachers to other schools at a rate of about 7% per year. (p. 190)

Thornton, Perreault, and Jennings (2008) also address reasons that teachers leave that may not be related to retirement and propose that “teachers leave the profession because of job dissatisfaction issues associated with low salaries, lack of support from the school administration, lack of student motivation, student discipline problems, and a lack of teacher influence over decision-making” (p. 353).

According to Hanushek and Rivkin (2007), an analysis of approximately 25 percent “of teachers who leave schools [do so] because they are dissatisfied cite low salaries, lack of support from the school administration, student discipline problems, and lack of teacher influence over decision making” (p. 77). This data is supported after controlling for teacher and school characteristics.

While approaching “teacher turnover and staffing problems from an organizational perspective” Ingersoll (2001b) states that “employee supply demand, and turnover are central issues in organizational theory and research. Likewise, school staffing problems and teacher turnover are central issues in educational research and policy;” However, according to Ingersoll, little effort has been made to apply “the former perspective to the latter issues” (p. 504). Kelly (2011) seeks to address employee turnover and bases his analysis on the following factors:

- a) Understanding employee turnover is important because of its link to the performance and effectiveness of organizations
- b) Fully understanding turnover requires examining it at the level of the organization and
- c) Fully understanding turnover requires examining the character and conditions of the organizations within which employees work. (p. 14)

When considering teacher turnover factors from an organizational perspective, whether teachers' departure is a function of migration or attrition becomes relevant during an analysis of organizational factors (Ingersoll, 2001b). Having an understanding of the "types of employees [that] flow in and out of an organization [is] considered relevant" (p. 505) and whether employees migrate to other schools to teach or leave teaching all together is essential in understanding employee turnover.

Ingersoll's (2001b) last assertion in his analysis suggests that "fully understanding turnover requires examining the character and conditions of the organizations within which employees work" (p. 506). While employee characteristics, both individual and personal, are considered while examining organizational factors, Ingersoll contends that "the overall conditions of workplaces and job site significantly affect the attachment of employees to the organization" (p. 506). Further, Kelly (2011) states that the most important organizational conditions associated with "teacher turnover" (p. 14) include "the compensation structure for employees;" "the level of administrative support;" "the degree of conflict and strife within an organization;" [and] "the degree of employee input into the influences over organizational policies" (p. 14). Having found a connection between the conditions within an organization that affect the motivation of employees as well as their commitment and turnover rates, Kelly (2011) states that a reasonable expectation can be supported that organizational conditions affect teacher departure rates from schools when viewed through "lens of attrition" (p. 14).

Rosenholtz (1989) also offers research on organizational factors and issues that bring teacher quality into focus, and the notion that teachers who experienced support as they learn and also felt supported in their teaching practices felt a greater sense of commitment as well

as being more effective in their teaching. Additionally, a greater sense of efficacy emerged when teachers felt supported, which in turn may improve teacher retention. Rosenholtz (1989) further maintains that schools must also be understood as teachers understand them, and further that those studying school organizations must capture how schools are viewed by teachers who work within them.

Professional Learning Communities

During the last two decades, researchers have explored Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as an aspect of school reform and cultural shift that would promote school improvement, build organizational capacity, increase student achievement, enhance and sustain teacher professional development and collegiality, and increase teacher quality and effectiveness. PLCs have embedded collaborative structures and processes, have shared purpose, and create a learning organization consisting of members within an entire organization that is supported through defined processes and procedures (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2005; DuFour et al., 2006; Hord, 1997; Morrissey, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Reeves, 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

As a school reform, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are receiving recognition for having the potential to effect change in schools and have been referred to as “one of the most talked about ideas in education today” (Thompson, 2004, p. 1). Additionally, PLCs are supported with statements such as “never before has there been such widespread agreement among researchers and practitioners regarding the most promising approach to significantly improve schools” (Eaker, & Keating, 2008, p. 14). According to Hord (2008), “today the most promising context for continuous professional learning is the

professional learning community. The three words explain the concept: professionals coming together in a group – a community – to learn” (p. 10). The practice of teachers working alone in isolation in their individual classrooms is slowly changing and teachers are beginning to work collaboratively in many instances and are sharing information and learning from each other regarding classroom practices. Thigpen (2011) views PLCs as not only a method of enhancing student academic achievement but also as having the potential to improve “collegiality among staff and [thus] a reduction in teacher/staff isolation, improved professional practice, and an improved school culture” (p. 4).

While attempting to give a definition of a PLC, Morrissey (2000) states:

The term “professional learning community” defines itself. A school that operates as such engages the entire group of professional in coming together for learning within a supportive, self-created *community*. Teacher and administrator learning is complex, deeper, and more fruitful in a social setting, where the participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other. When new ideas are processed in interaction with others, multiple sources of knowledge and expertise expand and test the new concepts as part of the learning experience. The professional learning community provides a setting that is richer and more stimulating. (pp. 3-4)

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) define a PLC as “the very essence of a **learning** community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” and

further describe a PLC as being “composed of collaborative teams whose members work **interdependently** to achieve **common goals** linked to the purpose of learning for all” (p. 3).

Hord (1997) determined that no universal definition exists for a PLC, and sets forth five necessary attributes for PLCs:

- Supportive and shared leadership
- Collective creativity
- Shared Values and Vision
- Supportive Conditions and
- Shared personal practice (pp. 14-23)

Shared and supportive leadership is conceptualized by Hord (2007) as being changes in a school that the principal accepts, appreciates, and nurtures. The principal is further challenged when he or she shares their authority, power, and decision making role with his staff, while using a collegial and facilitative leadership style.

Collective creativity speaks to collective learning and involves the staff coming together departmentally to work in a collegial and collaborative manner that focuses on instructional presentation and student outcomes.

Shared values and vision, the third hallmark of Hord’s framework, helps to guide the behaviors of all members of the PLC. Driven by the school’s improvement plan, the vision is shared by the staff and consistently focuses on student learning. The vision becomes a mental image, and the image is always vivid during planning and instructional delivery. Reminders of the school’s vision are posted and displays of student success are also visible. The role of

continuously communicating the school's vision to both community and staff is assumed by the principal as she ensures a continuous focus on student achievement and learning.

Supportive conditions as described by Hord (2007) are necessary components that ensure productive functioning of a professional learning organization and are categorized as “physical and structural factors” and “capacities and relationships [that are] developed among staff members” (p. 4). Establishing regular meeting times and places are both critically important factors in supporting a successful PLC. Additionally, other factors such as appropriate schedules, effective communication, a meaningful staff development program, opportunities for collaboration, removing teacher isolation, and increasing teacher empowerment are all necessary support considerations.

Shared personal practice refers to instructional behaviors that involve teachers observing each other's instructional practices as a means of coaching or peer feedback, rather than being evaluative in nature. Mutual respect and trust are essential dimensions of shared personal practices that will be the result of positive working relationships that develop between staff members.

Building upon Astuto and Clark's (1994) term “professional community of learners,” Hord (1997) focuses on the goal of enhancing [teachers'] “effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus Hord concludes that “this arrangement [can] also be termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*” (p. 6).

Expanding on the concept of organizational structures within schools, as related to three communities existing in schools, Astuto and Clark (1994) suggest the following:

Organizational structures that are consistent with the principles of community are particularly relevant for schools. The work of schools involves three major communities: the professional community, various learning communities, and stakeholder community. (p. 516)

It is generally accepted by some researchers that the five major themes or essential characteristics of a reform to be considered a PLCs are: 1) shared beliefs, values, and vision, 2) collective inquiry, 3) reflective dialogue, 4) collaborative teams, and 5) a focus on continuous improvement and results (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Murphy & Lick, 2001; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

DuFour (2004) adds greater specificity to the essentials of PLCs by stating “to create a professional learning community, [leaders should] focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold [oneself] accountable for results” (p. 6). DuFour cautions against the loose use of the term professional learning community that is applied to “every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education” and through this loose interpretation or definition threatens to jeopardize the effectiveness of PLCs as an educational “reform movement” (p. 6). By focusing on guiding principles that support PLCs, schools can avoid the threat to the PLC concept as a reform movement. To this end, DuFour proposes three guiding principles or big ideas: 1) Ensuring that students learn, 2) A culture of collaboration, and 3) A focus on results. Three critical questions emerge from the first guiding principle that PLC schools should address:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How we know when they have learned it?

- How will we respond when students experience difficulty?

A school's response to the last question helps to distinguish schools with PLCs from traditional schools. Peretti (2009) reminds us that "student success is no longer the responsibility of an individual teacher; it is the duty of the entire school community" (p. 5).

For this study, the following operational definition (Reichstetter, 2006) of PLCs has been chosen:

A professional learning community is made up of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision. Facilitating this effort are:

- supportive leadership and structural conditions
- collective challenging, questioning, and reflecting on team-designed lessons and instructional practices/experiences, and
- team decisions on essential learning outcomes and intervention/enrichment activities based on results of common formative student assessments. (p. 1)

When examining PLCs it becomes apparent that professional development of teachers is one of the main objectives, and Hord (2008) connects PLCs to quality teaching by adding:

A professional learning community is not just a place where faculty meet regularly or groups come together to work collaboratively. A true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness so all students learn successfully to high standards. The professional learning community

serves to promote quality teaching, the prime factor in whether students learn well. (p. 13)

Morrow (2010), in a dissertation from Appalachian State University, conducted a study entitled “*Teachers’ Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Opportunities for promoting Professional Growth*” and found that participating teachers viewed PLCs “as a framework and foundation for promoting and sustaining ongoing, effective professional growth” (p. v). A qualitative case study design was used for Morrow’s (2010) study and included one-on-one interviews, focus groups and observations that allowed the data to be triangulated. In addition to organizational structures and professional development, a school’s culture is critically important in establishing and sustaining a PLC.

School Culture

A school’s “culture represents the shared assumptions, beliefs, values and habits that constitute the norms for the school that shape how professionals think, feel, and act. Simply stated it’s the way we do business around here” (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008, p. 176). Additionally, as one examines “the relationship between professional learning community and school culture,” it is determined that a “school [‘s] culture results from interpersonal interactions between teachers, groups of teachers, administrators and others, and common perceptions of these groups, detailing collective beliefs, attitudes and values of school personnel” (Hipp, et al., 2008, p. 173). Accordingly, it is necessary that “professional learning communities’ practices become embedded into the day-to-day school culture” (Eaker & Keating, 2008, p. 15). Also, “collaboratively developed shared values and commitments can be a powerful tool for shaping school culture” (Eaker & Keating, 2008, p. 17).

According to Eaker and Keating (2008) cultural shifts that help schools move towards becoming PLCs involve three elements: 1) a shift in fundamental purpose from teaching to learning, 2) a shift in the work of teachers, and 3) a shift in focus. The three shifts involve dramatic thinking in how teachers are committed to ensure learning for all students; also how different questions are asked during the cultural shift, and include how teachers work differently to ensure learning. Teachers also work collaboratively and collectively, and this focus represents a shift from teacher isolation to one of teacher collaboration. The last shift focuses on student results and outcomes that help to determine the effectiveness of teacher collaboration, including determining whether student learning is taking place, as well as the effectiveness of teachers' professional practice.

Barth (2002) discusses the role of an instructional leader in changing the culture of a school and suggests the following:

Probably the most important—and the most difficult—job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school. The school's culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, "the way we do things around here." A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have. One cannot, of course, change a school culture alone. But one can provide forms of leadership that invite others to join as observers of the old and architects of the new.

The effect must be to transform what we did last September into we would like to do next September. (p. 6)

School cultures, according to Barth (2002), can be hospitable or toxic; can promote or work in opposition to school reform; and the culture of schools does resist change. One characteristic of a school's culture reflects how schools handle "nondiscussables" (p. 7) or topics that cause anxiety to the faculty and staff. Changing a school's culture requires conversations of all topics, especially topics that impede or affect student learning.

Furthermore Thigpen (2011) states:

The everyday activity, behavior and protocols at a school has underneath it an undercurrent of thoughts, values, beliefs and ideas about learning teaching and their role in that efforts, and that culture almost silently pervades and guides the day-to-day effort at a school. (p. 13)

The fact remains that instructional leaders must enable faculty and staff to discuss issues and concerns that manifest as the elephant in the room as the school organization seeks to move towards a more healthy culture geared towards creating and sustaining a PLC. Clearly, in a culture of collegiality, professional educators talk about their practice, share knowledge of craft, observe one another, and root for each other's success (Barth, 2006).

Mentoring and Induction

Mentoring and induction are areas that several researchers have determined may positively influence teacher retention. Although the very nature of teaching requires on-going interactions with students, teachers often work alone and are isolated from colleagues.

According to Ingersoll and Kralik (2004), "[these experiences] can be especially difficult for

new entrants who, upon accepting a teaching position in a school, are often left on their own to succeed or fail within the confines of their own classrooms” (p. 2). Challenges faced by new teachers in the early years of their profession are also experienced in isolation (Kardos & Johnson, 2007) and while most vulnerable and in great need of assistance, “they are left to sink or swim” (Kardos & Johnson, 2007, p. 26). Mentoring and induction programs are introduced in response to address new teachers’ concerns and to help support the development of beginning teachers (Berry, Hopkins-Thompson, & Hoke, 2002).

For several decades professionals have asserted that quality mentoring and induction programs were needed to help lower attrition and improve teacher retention in public schools (Berry, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Villani, 2002). Wynn et al. (2007) suggest “that the transition into the teaching profession can be eased through induction and mentoring programs” (p. 212). Mandel (2006) stresses the importance of having the support of a caring mentor that can prove beneficial in helping first year teachers survive. Wong (2005) warns that “mentors are very important, but they must be part of an induction process aligned to the district’s vision, mission, and structure” (p. 45).

Smith and Ingersoll (2004), in a follow up study of the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey, determined that beginning teachers who were assigned same-subject mentors and other support, such as collaboration with other teachers and same planning periods, were less likely to leave teaching than teachers who did not have the same level of support through mentoring and induction programs.

Coaching, as part of mentoring and induction programs, is a process whereby novice and veteran teachers with varying levels of experience are able to observe each other in a

non-judgmental way, and consequently to self-reflect on their experiences. According to Villani (2002), continued coaching helps beginning teachers become more involved in problem solving strategies rather than remaining in a basic orientation level. Also, due to the confidential nature of a coaching relationship, teachers are able to confide in one another, thus providing an opportunity to build better relationships (Heider, 2005). Continuing to expand on the merits of coaching, Heider contends that “peer coaching is a means by which America’s schools can overcome isolation and build collegial environments that improve teacher retention rates and, ultimately, classroom instruction” (p. 11).

Research also suggests that school districts that include mentoring programs as part of their induction process tend to exhibit evidence of a positive impact on teachers in general, as well as rates of retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Additionally, when districts ensure that induction programs are well-planned and well-designed, these districts tend to experience lower rates of attrition and higher retention rates (Shockley, Guglielmino, & Watlington, 2007).

In the final analysis, Heider (2005) states “mentoring programs help school districts create these nurturing environments which reduce teacher isolation, and in turn inspire new teachers” (p. 12). Sleppin (2009) in his dissertation from Walden College entitled *New Teacher Isolation and its Relationship to Teacher Attrition* contends that “improving collaboration between new and experienced teachers is an important aspect of breaking down the barriers of teacher isolation” (p. 26). After completing his qualitative study, Sleppin (2009) further asserts that new teachers, those having teaching experience of three years or less, believe that mentoring also helps to promote a sense of belonging to the learning

community. Additionally, to ensure that beginning teachers are supported during their initial years, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2002) maintains that "the era of solo teaching in isolated classrooms is over, [and] to support quality teaching our schools must support strong professional learning communities" (p. 13).

As educational leaders seek to solve the problem of teacher retention, Imazeki (2005) warns that teacher "shortages can have serious consequences for the quality of education that students receive" (p. 431). Likewise, Jalongo and Heider (2006) suggest that "many students are experiencing a substandard education in a considerable number of districts" (p. 379) as qualified teachers continue to leave the profession. Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, and Diaz (2004) add that high teacher turnover creates greater difficulty in developing education programs that are coherent.

Costs associated with recruiting, hiring, training and maintaining both novice and experienced teacher are staggering in that some \$7.34 billion are incurred annually to cover all expenses associated with teacher replacement on a national level (Barnes et al., 2007). Thornton, Perreault, and Jennings (2008) observe that the "overall effort that goes into the recruitment and training of replacements has a negative impact on schools and achievement" (p. 353). Also, replacing teachers who leave early in their careers places an undue burden on the school community and on the school leader. With the large percentage of baby boomer teachers approaching retirement age, it becomes imperative that entering beginning teachers remain in the profession (Aaronson & Meckel, 2009).

The business community is also affected by the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of schools relative to student academic success and student global readiness. For example, the

organization of businesses that comprise High Five has a vested interest in the success of schools in North Carolina and have subsequently invested in five districts in the state in an effort to help improve student readiness and academic performance. High Five's investment in teachers through professional development and assisting with the implementation of Professional Learning Communities includes a teacher retention component. All and all, Algozzine et al. (2007) believe that "ensuring a qualified teacher in every classroom is a central part of the latest agenda to strengthen public education and [to] maximize student achievement" (p. 137).

Summary of Research on Teacher Retention and Professional Learning Communities

Overall, the topic of teacher retention has been the focus of researchers for several decades, thus providing possible explanations as to why teachers migrate within the profession or leave the teaching profession all together. The literature is replete with studies that examine topics such as school culture, teacher job satisfaction, low compensation and principal leadership. Also baby boomers, who comprise 53 percent of current teachers, and half of them over 50 years old with an average retirement age of 59 (Carroll, 2009) are being studied by researchers. Given the current rates of attrition, a loss of this magnitude could create a greater teacher shortage. A generous amount of research has also been conducted regarding teacher turnover trends, including financial implication resulting from teacher migration or teachers opting to exit from the profession.

The literature is also flooded with research studies that address the importance of keeping qualified teachers in classrooms through alternative certification programs, mentoring and induction programs, teacher collaboration, and effective principal leadership. Less plentiful is research on organizational factors that relate to teacher turnover and staffing issues (Ingersoll, 2001a, 2001b). Rosenholtz (1989) suggests that teacher commitment to remain in the profession could be enhanced by teachers who feel supported in their teaching practices. Teacher working conditions, while not heavily researched, is an area that has also been cited as reasons that teachers leave (Brill & McCartney, 2008) and merits further research.

Other concerns related to high rates of turnover involve minimal administrative support, discipline issues, diminished opportunities for faculty input on school decisions, and insufficient salaries as stated by Ingersoll (2001b). Viewing teacher turnover from an organizational perspective requires one to understand employee turnover as it relates to organization effectiveness, to examine turnover at the organizational level, and to understand the characteristics and organizational conditions under which employees work. Finally, the employee compensation structure; the administrative level of support given new employees, and the level of conflict in an organization can affect rates of turnover, employee commitment and employee motivation (Ingersoll, 2001b, pp. 505-506).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), as a school reform effort, are receiving a vast amount of attention by researchers. Overall, PLCs focus in areas of overall school improvement by seeking to build organizational capacity; working to improve student achievement; promoting teacher professional development; and seeking to improve teacher

quality and effectiveness. PLCs also seek to replace teacher isolation with a collaborative and supportive culture that allows all members of the community to work towards achieving goals designed to ensure learning for all.

DuFour's (2004) Professional Learning Community (PLC) model suggests a focus shift which moves the focus from teachers teaching, to students learning, and also includes an accountability component. DuFour's (2004) model also require members of the PLCs to ask questions and make decisions regarding what students will be taught; whether students have learned what was taught; and how to respond if students have or have not learned what was taught.

While substantial research has been done separately in the areas of teacher attrition and retention, as well as Professional Learning Communities, research that examines teacher retention and attrition within the scope of PLCs is an under-researched area. Likewise, studies related to beginning teachers' perception of PLCs still remains under-researched.

This qualitative study examines the perception of beginning teachers involved in Professional Learning Communities, and further examines how beginning teachers' decisions to , move, or leave are influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities. Further research is especially warranted in this area since Professional Learning Communities are becoming part of the educational landscape, and teacher retention and attrition issues continue to plague the profession.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Teacher shortages in American public schools may reach a critical point in the next few years as present teachers retire and attrition rates for new teachers continue to follow current trends. For educational leaders the challenge is to bring about a program of recruiting, training, and retaining teachers that is effective in addressing the problem of teacher retention. As an educational reform effort, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) serve as a platform for professional development and adult learning, and these issues should be carefully considered when designing professional development programs. The Professional Learning Community embraces teacher collaboration as one of its main components and also assists teachers as they move from isolation to collaboration. Beginning teachers may benefit from PLCs especially when collaboration becomes a daily “part of their routine work practice” (DuFour et al., 2005, p. 3). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perceptions of beginning teachers involved in PLCs, and to determine how beginning teachers’ decisions to stay, move or leave were influenced by their perceptions of PLCs.

Stake (1995) defines case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (xi). A case study also has “a boundary and working parts” and “is likely to be purposive, even having a ‘self’” (p. 2). Stake further states:

The case is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system. Thus people and programs clearly are prospective cases. Events and processes fit the definition less well. (p. 2)

Other terms used by Stake (1995) to describe case studies include intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies (pp. 3-4). An intrinsic case study suggests a curiosity in a particular problem and an understanding that information gleaned from the case study may not help with other cases. On the other hand instrumental case study may be used when we [researchers] “have a research question, a puzzlement, [or] a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the questions by studying a particular case” (p. 3). Lastly, collective case study may be used when several cases are being included in the study.

Stake (2010) also contends that “[q]ualitative researchers seek data that represent personal experience in particular situations” and that “many qualitative data are personal happenings in time in a place” (p. 88). Stake further believes that “[s]tandard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field making observations and making interpretations iteratively” (p. 55). Regarding interpretations, stake reminds us that:

The best interpretations will be logical extensions of the simple description but also will include contemplative, speculative, even aesthetic extension. The reader would be deceived if allowed to think that these interpretations had been agreed upon, certified in some way. They are contributions of the researcher, writ so as to make it

clear they are personal interpretations. All people make interpretations. All research requires interpretations. Qualitative research relies heavily on interpretive perceptions throughout the planning, data gathering, analysis and write-up of the study. (p. 55)

According to Creswell (2007), a case study “is a type of design in qualitative research or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry” (p. 73). During a case study, the researcher “explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 73). Merriam (1998) adds:

A case study is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

As described by Merriam (1998) “qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding [and] the product of a qualitative study is rich [and] descriptive. Words and pictures, rather than numbers, are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon” (p. 8). Additionally, the qualitative researcher assumes the “view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experience they have in the world” (p. 6). In contrasting qualitative research to quantitative research, Merriam (1998) states:

In contrast to quantitative research, which takes apart a phenomenon to examine component parts (which become the variables of the study), qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole. It is assumed that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions. (p. 6)

Patton (2002) also contrasts quantitative and qualitative methods by making the argument that methods in qualitative research allow the researcher to study "issues in depth and detail" (p. 14). Thus the study can be approached without the constraints of "predetermined categories of analysis that contribute to the depth, openness and detail of qualitative inquiry" (p. 14). Conversely, researchers utilizing quantitative methods require "the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into a limited number of predetermined categories to which numbers are assigned" (p. 14).

A case study approach was appropriate for this study since the context involved persons (teachers) who worked within an institution (school) and the focus was on teachers within their natural settings. A choice was made from three specific types of case studies: "the intrinsic case study ... the instrumental case study ... [and] a collective case study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). If a researcher seeks to focus on a single issue, a "single instrumental case study" is appropriate along with selecting "one bounded case" to address the issue. The "collective case study" may also be selected, and although "one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue". When using the

“collective case study” (p. 74) the researcher may select “several programs from several research sites or multiple programs within a single site” to conduct the study (p. 74). The third type of case study is the “intrinsic case study” where “the case itself” is the focus of the study (p. 74). Most often case studies are unusual that qualify for the “intrinsic case study” analysis (p. 74). A “collective case study” was used for this study as the single concern regarding PLCs and the cases were the individual teachers in four different departments in a high school in a southeast county in North Carolina. Examining beginning teachers’ perception of their involvement with PLCs constituted a descriptive case study as set forth by Merriam (1998). Merriam states that “a descriptive case study in education is one that presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study—a historical case study that chronicles a sequence of events” (p. 38). This study met the criteria for being both a collective case study and a descriptive case study. Since a single issue was selected and was studied in different departments within one school (Creswell, 2002), the criterion for a collective case study was satisfied. The descriptive criterion was satisfied because a detailed accounting of the phenomenon that was studied was also presented (Merriam, 1998). Descriptive case studies are also described by Merriam (1998) as being useful “in presenting basic information about innovative programs and practices [that] are often the focus of descriptive case studies in education” (p. 38). Creswell (2007) states that “a qualitative approach [is one] in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time”. In addition “multiple sources of information [including] observations, interviews, audiovisual material and documents and reports” are used in case study research (p. 73). The focus of this study was on the process rather than the outcomes of

the study and in the context “rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19).

Since the purpose of this case study was to understand the perception of teachers and their involvement with PLCs, an attempt was made to capture the essence of shared perceptions. While teachers have been given opportunities to make decisions with regard to creating formative and summative assessments within the PLC model, limited research has been gathered on their perceptions of PLCs and further, how their perceptions of PLCs influence their decisions to remain or leave the teaching profession. Qualitative research lends itself to inquiring about experiences such as the experiences teachers encounter through PLCs and their perceptions of their various experiences. This study examined a school reform effort using PLCs and sought to understand how beginning teachers, those teachers who have been teaching for at least three years but less than four years, expressed their perceptions of this educational reform. Should the preferred selected sample not have yielded enough participants, the criteria for the sample was expanded to beginning teachers with one to five years or one to six years of experience.

Efforts to maintain beginning teachers in classrooms for three years is important, since 14 percent of beginning teachers leave during their first year, 33 percent of teachers leave during their first three years, and 46 percent leave the classroom by year five (NCTAF, 2003). If effective retention strategies are implemented, perhaps the 33 percent attrition that occurs during the third year rate could be lowered, thus resulting in a more favorable retention rate. Maintaining a focus on teachers during their first three years of teaching is also

important due to the possible change in dynamics that may be experienced by teachers who successfully complete three years of teaching and enter their fourth year. The experience of teachers who enter their fourth year of teaching is described by Margolis (2008) as:

a crucial time when the most talented teachers decide to stay or leave.

These are not necessarily the same teachers who are oft-cited as leaving teaching within five years (see Ingersoll, 2001) due to stress or their feeling ill-prepared, but are ones who have adjusted quickly to the profession and are not facing boredom and routine along with stress and frustration. (p. 161)

Johnson (2009) designates teachers who successfully complete three years of teaching and enter their fourth year as second-stage teachers and believes that second-stage teachers may present opportunities that are beneficial to schools if schools would focus on this group as instructional leaders. Johnson (2009) supports this recommendation by stating that “many have achieved a sense of instructional competence and confidence in their teaching and are poised to exercise leadership in their schools” (p. 3). Johnson, however, also acknowledges that “schools cannot count on their [second-stage teachers’] contribution for there is no guarantee that these experienced teachers will remain in the classroom, even though most have achieved tenure” (p. 3). Clearly it is incumbent upon educational leaders to determine how teachers perceive their beginning years in teaching and to design support programs to enhance teacher retention.

In attempting to address the question of beginning teachers’ perceptions, the following research questions were addressed in this qualitative case study:

1. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers involved in PLCs?
 - 1A. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of mentoring in Professional Learning Communities?
2. How are beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave influenced by their perceptions of PLCs?

Theoretical Framework

The researcher's epistemological stance is that of social constructivism whose requirements seek that the world be understood in places where the researcher "live[s] and work[s]" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). According to Creswell (2007) social constructivists, while giving "subjective meaning" to experiences, are searching for "complexity of views" as opposed to limiting and narrowing "the meaning into a few categories or ideas" (p. 20). Additionally, according to Creswell (2007), participants' subjective meanings are the result of interactions with others where norms are determined both from an historical and cultural perspective. Learning, as a social activity, is supported though a collective social setting, does not occur in isolation, and emerges from participants (Moll, 1990). Hence, the constructivist researcher looks for processes and attempts to describe ways that participants have derived meaning from experiences from which perceptions may be drawn. This study, through its examination of beginning teachers' perceptions of PLCs, and a further examination of how beginning teachers expressed their perceptions, supported the social constructivist perspective. A case study research method was used for this qualitative study.

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select participants (beginning teachers) who had participated in PLCs. This approach sought to gain a deeper understanding

of perceptions formed by teachers as a result of their experiences with PLCs. Within the context of this study, the focus was aimed at understanding the shared meaning by the cases (the teachers in the study) within the PLC and how the PLC perceptions influenced their thinking. In addition to having a focus on identifying shared experiences, thematic patterns were constructed through cross case comparison. This study focused on what beginning teachers perceived from their experiences with PLCs as opposed to how they perceived their experiences with PLCs.

Site Selection and Sample

One high school in a southeastern district in North Carolina was selected for the study. The participants were a total of sixteen Beginning III teachers, four in each core area (English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies) who had taught for at least one but less than four years. If the preferred sample did not yield enough participants, the years of experience would have been expanded to beginning teachers with one to five years or one to six years of experience with PLCs. This specific high school was selected due to the principal who assumed leadership in the high school seven years ago and for his belief and dedication to PLCs. Additionally, the principal is a visionary and made known his level of expectation for both teachers and students alike as both strove for academic excellence. All students were expected to perform at their best, regardless of their socio-economic level or any other demographic characteristic. Prior to accepting the principalship at the chosen high school, the principal was the educational leader of a middle school that was the first middle school in the district to have PLCs.

Since Principal X's leadership is school-wide, each core department received the same professional development which is an important component of PLCs. Each department received an equal opportunity to grow and develop under Principal X's leadership and this allowed an equal playing field for professional development under the PLC concept.

According to Andrews, Gilbert, and Martin (2007) "almost one out of every two beginning teachers (46%) has left the classroom by the end of his or her first 5 years of teaching, with 14% leaving within the 1st year and 33% leaving the profession within 3 years" (p. 4). Educational leaders may benefit from understanding the reasons teachers leave at such accelerated rates during their early years of teaching. Attempts to understand beginning teachers' perceptions at the end of years one, two and three might also yield data that could be critical in addressing beginning teacher retention and attrition rates. Teachers who enter their fourth year of teaching are no longer designated beginning teachers and according to Johnson (2009), may be ready to assume leadership roles as second-stage teachers.

Beginning III teachers who have been involved with PLCs for three years or more may have a clearer understanding of the true nature of PLCs and to perceive both negative and positive results associated with this school reform. After securing Institutional Review Board approval from North Carolina State University for the study, a request was made to the school district to conduct the study.

A high school in a southeastern district was chosen as a purposeful sample. While sample size is not specifically defined in qualitative research (Baum, 2002; Patton, 2002), the sample size in qualitative research focuses on small numbers and seeks to study subject(s) in

greater depth and detail (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). As stated by Patton (2002) “the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 46). Also, in attempting to gather the most information about a phenomenon being studied, purposeful sampling is a common and typical method used in case studies (Patton, 2002). Choosing teachers who had experienced PLCs in their schools qualified them to share their perceptions of PLCs.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), case studies that satisfy a criterion requirement may be found useful regarding quality assurance. In this study, Beginning Teachers III were teachers who had been teaching and involved with PLCs for at least three but less than four years, and not more than six years with an expanded criteria.

After the researcher received approval from the southeastern school district to conduct the study, the principal of the selected high school was contacted to seek approval to conduct the study. A high school was selected because high schools were the first to be involved with the implementation of PLCs in 2004. Therefore, high school personnel had received the most training and have been involved with PLCs longer than middle or elementary schools in the district. All high schools received equal training during the implementation period throughout the county. While some variance in protocols may have existed, the implementation of PLCs was mandated and all high schools were expected to operate as PLCs. After approval was granted by the principal, the researcher obtained recommended names from the principal and the assistant principal relative to teachers who were eligible candidates for the study. Beginning teachers III were the targeted population. The potential participants were contacted and requested to participate in the study. A letter

was written to the participants that advised them about the study and informed them that they would be free to withdraw from the study at any time. Two beginning teachers returned their consent forms and agreed to participate in the study. Individual interviews took place at the high school at the end of the school day in a conference room in the school's media center, in the student services department, or a classroom. The objective was to be in a quiet and comfortable setting where the teachers could feel comfortable when they spoke with the researcher.

Data Collection

The original research design called for data to be collected from sixteen teachers, four from each specified departments in the high school in the form of interviews. However a total of eight teachers actually participated in the study and represented six different departments. The in depth interviews were transcribed by the researcher. A semi-structured interview protocol was designed by the researcher and the questions were followed according to the protocol except in cases where probing questions were asked and questions of clarification were necessary (See Appendix A). The interview questions were drawn from the researcher's experience with PLCs as well as from the research literature on Professional Learning Communities. Additionally for two years the researcher facilitated a beginning teachers' support group at her place of employment that offered an opportunity to witness first hand concerns and to receive input from beginning teachers. The researcher also worked closely with the beginning teacher coordinator and attended new teacher meetings that also provided an opportunity to hear beginning teachers' questions and suggestions first hand. From time to

time the coordinator, as well as teachers, would request input from the researcher as an assistant principal. Involvement on this level with beginning teachers provided valuable insight into the experiences and perceptions of beginning teachers. It also provided opportunities to build personal relationships with beginning teachers and to build confidence and trust between the researcher and beginning teachers, particularly in the beginning teacher support group where trust was a mandatory factor that was agreed to by all members. What was said at group meeting remained at the group meeting unless all agreed that it could be discussed outside of the group. The researcher's counseling experience and skills were helpful in facilitating the beginning teachers' support group.

Coding was done on each case study (teacher) and was compared to each of the other teachers within the same school. A thematic matrix was designed to show emerging themes of each single case study. The first level of coding provided help with managing data about each interview section, the single case study; the next level was within the school, and the final level involved coding to find patterns or similarities among all case studies in all six departments.

Interviews

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at North Carolina State University (NCSU) had not initially given approval for the interviews to be held on the school's campus as was requested in the researcher's original application. Consequently, all interviews had to take place off campus. After the researcher attended a beginning teachers' PLC meeting and explained the study to the beginning teachers and left the information letters and consent forms, she received two signed consent forms from teacher volunteers to participate in the

study. Subsequently after e-mailing and speaking with the principal, the principal advised the researcher that beginning teachers were not comfortable going off campus to meet with the researcher or meeting the researcher at an off campus site. The researcher informed the principal that it was her intention to pick up the teachers and take them to the library that was located about one-quarter of a mile away from the school. Upon receiving this information the principal recommended that an effort be made to see if the interviews could be held on campus as he believed a better teacher response would be forthcoming. A written request was made to the IRB Office at NCSU to hold teacher interviews on campus. After meeting modification requirements, within days permission was granted to hold the interviews on campus. The IRB request was time sensitive since the end of the school year was fast approaching.

After receiving permission to hold the interviews on campus the researcher attended a second beginning teachers' PLC and handed out information letters and consent forms a second time. Meanwhile, the two teachers who signed up for interviews prior to the IRB approval for on campus interviews were interviewed off campus as required. The researcher attended a third and final beginning teachers' PLC that was celebratory in nature and again handed out required paperwork and collected the forms during that visit. Eleven additional beginning teachers signed up for the interviews, however only six of those eight actually participated in the interviews; thus a total of eight beginning teachers were interviewed in all. The interviews took place over a three week period during the months of May and June during the spring semester. The second tier interview schedule was set for the last day of school when most students would have completed all year-end testing. A semi-structured

interview model was followed. While Beginning Teachers III were the original targeted population no Beginning Teachers III volunteered to participate in the study. The actual sample participants consisted of six Beginning Teachers I and two Beginning Teachers II, for a total of eight beginning teachers. Although 16 beginning teachers were originally proposed, four in each core area of English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science, volunteer participants were not from the four core areas. Instead of the four core areas, six different departments were represented by volunteer participants and included two from Mathematics; two from Social Studies; one from Science; one from Career and Technical Education; one from Foreign Language and one from Special Education. The extended across discipline data may present a more varied perceptions of beginning teachers throughout the school.

The interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour, and the sessions were one-on-one with the researcher; however the interviews ranged in time from twenty-five to fifty minutes each. The interviews were recorded unless the sample member objected to being recorded, in which case the researcher planned to take notes or to type the information into a personal computer immediately after the interview. No sample member objected to being recorded. Purposeful sampling was appropriate in selecting participants for this study since beginning teachers were selected based on criteria of having no less than one and no more than six years of involvement with PLCs. Beginning Teachers I, II, and III were eligible to participate. An interview schedule was designed prior to the interview date and was e-mailed to all participants who had signed up to be interviewed, and included the principal and the assistant principal. The receptionist was also given a copy of the schedule that allowed her to know where the teachers were while they were being interviewed. The

interviews were held in the corner of the school's library which ensured privacy and ensured that no one was able to hear the conversation between the researcher and the participants. All consent forms were signed before the interviews began and each participant was given a copy of the consent form that had been signed by both the participant and the researcher. Two digital audio micro recorders were used for the interviews. One of the digital recorders ran out of space during one of the final interviews; however the complete interview was captured on the second recorder. Fictitious names were assigned to the participants to protect their identity and the real name and fictitious name of each participant was known only to the individual participants and the researcher. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The tapes were transcribed verbatim.

Field Notes

Field notes, as described by Merriam (1998), are “what is written down or mechanically recorded from a period of observation [and] becomes the raw data from which a study's findings eventually emerge” (p. 104), and are a critical part of the observation and should be put in a more permanent form such as being “written, typed or dictated” (p. 104) shortly after the observation is complete. Creswell (2007) speaks to the summarization and chronological order of observed activities that when recorded effectively, can prove beneficial as the researcher develops a chronological order of how an activity unfolded (p. 138). Engaging in “strategic and focused notes” (Patton, 2002, p. 383) is also an effective way to create field notes. The researcher used field notes to record observations of participants during the interviews, and after the interviews, when the recorders were turned off. Often after the formal interview, teachers continued to converse with the researcher,

however did so in a less formal manner. Field notes were reviewed during the data analysis phase of the study, and often supported emerging themes.

Documents

Information was also secured from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction relative to retention rates of beginning teachers at the selected high school for the three previous years. Data extracted from the North Carolina Report Card website (Appendix C) was examined, and showed the percentage of teachers in three categories of years of experience and the total turnover percentages for the school organization for the sample school, the district and the state. A closer examination showed that beginning teachers with 0-3 years of experience at Noble High represented 12 percent of the total school population for the 2009-2010 school year; 7 percent of the total population for the 2010-2011 school year and 12 percent of the total population for the 2011-12 school year. Academic year 2011-2012 appears to have interesting dynamics as the 0-3 year category jumped from 7 percent to 12 percent; the 4-10 year category decreased from 25 percent to 22 percent and the 10+ year experience category decreased from 68 percent to 66 percent. These percentages may suggest that there was heavy movement in the 10+ years which could signal large retirement numbers, as well as a large number of teachers in the 4-10 year category who moved to the 10 year+ category. The 7 percent to 12 percent increase from 0-3 years does indicate significant hiring of beginning teachers. While the total turnover rate was 10 percent for the 2011-2012 academic year, it was only 4 percent for the prior 2010-11 academic year. Other categories of years of experience include 4-10 years and 10+ years. The data clearly shows that 66 percent of the total population at Noble High was in the 10+ year category which

most likely includes baby boomers that may already be eligible for retirement, or will become eligible in the next few years. In addition to keeping a close watch on teachers' movement in and out of school organizations, particular attention should also be given to the number of newly hired teachers in schools. When beginning teachers replace veteran teachers, it is generally assumed that the level of support for novice teachers will increase. Further if novice teachers leave early in their careers they will be unable to acquire the skills necessary to become seasoned teachers. And, more importantly, an understanding of where teachers are positioned on their career continuum will allow principals to design plans to address both their future and immediate hiring needs.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (1998) data are to be analyzed as the study is being conducted simultaneously, as opposed to waiting until the study has been completed. The reason for handling analysis in this manner is because, "Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating" (p. 162). After all participants were interviewed, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Each participant's transcription was identified by the fictitious name that was assigned at the time of the interview. Analytic notes were written on the transcripts that identified any bits of data that might have been useful during the data analysis process. Merriam (2009) refers to this type of coding as "open coding" (p. 178) since the researcher is open to the emergence of any possibilities at this early stage of the analysis process. The researcher read and reread each transcript as necessary and looked for categories and common words as she compared participants' responses. The next step involved writing the interview questions on large

sticky pads and placing them on the wall and by color coding data that supported themes or topics. Data were recorded on the sheets placed on the walls and included words, phrases or sentences that helped to further sort out and categorize participants' responses. A comparative method was used in this qualitative case study that involved "collecting and analyzing data from several cases" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). Master lists were constructed from interview questions that included participants' responses and served as a matrix by showing the frequency of recurring words, patterns and concepts. This process helped to further reduce the data into manageable segments and to more clearly show emerging themes. Since this was a multiple case study, the analysis involved a "within case analysis" [and a] cross case analysis" (p. 194). Coding allowed the researcher to see themes emerge by the "words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Coding helps with managing data and can be viewed as a system of shorthand that allows for easy retrieval of data and "occurs on two levels – identifying information about the data, and interpretive constructs related to analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). Data from the transcripts were compared to the data from field notes and documents in an effort to recognize common themes. Themes were color coded to help with easy recognition and to help with organizing the data.

Validity and Reliability

The trustworthiness of research is important in any type of research whether it is qualitative or quantitative in nature. To address issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research Merriam (1998) espouses that, "They are trustworthy to the extent that there has been some accounting for their validity and reliability and the nature of qualitative research

means that this accounting takes different forms than in more positivist, quantitative research” (p. 198). Conducting an “investigation in an ethical manner” (p. 198) is primary when conducting qualitative research. Ensuring that the reader receives enough “depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’ this as opposed to quantitative studies where readers assume that specific “procedures have been followed” (Firestone, 1987, p. 19).

Yost (2006) describes how through the use of alternative criteria validity and reliability are maintained. Validity addresses whether information is being reported accurately and whether the results of a study are generalizable (Merriam, 1998) and are trustworthy. Validity speaks to trustworthiness. Reliability “refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). To address issues of validity and reliability, in addition to clarifying participants’ responses during the interviews, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher listened to the tapes multiple times to ensure that they were transcribed accurately. Also the researcher was diligent in her attempt to report her findings accurately. Prior to the interviews and during the interviews the researcher sought to establish trust between her and the participants.

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher has a natural inclination to seek to understand people and their perceptions of the world from a business, educational, and personal perspective. Seeking to understand others allows the researcher to have a better understanding of how others perceive occurrences. As a benefit, having people share their experiences with the researcher helps her to understand and process other people’s thoughts and allows a better understanding of the

journey of life. Also, the researcher enjoys the challenge of trying to figure out how people think, why they think as they do, and being able to anticipate people's behavior based on observations and dialogue.

Regarding the researcher's bias, she believes that her corporate upbringing in the world of work has given her a different perspective on the professional development of teachers. After leaving the corporate world and upon entering a public high school, the researcher's approach and understanding of the operations of school were more closely aligned with her assistant principal's than that of other counselors and teachers when she entered education. In her corporate role, she interacted with corporate managers in finance and that experience allowed a more global view of how companies were functioning from a financial perspective. The researcher was constantly on visits to other corporate sites in other states to assist other offices that needed her expertise. She was the recipient of many awards that took her to different states that offered opportunities to interact with other employees within the company. In short, professional development was embedded in the corporate structure and employees were valued as International Business Corporation's most prized asset. Each employee had a key to the building and was therefore able to go to work anytime he or she felt compelled to do so. Borderline brain washing? Perhaps yes, however, the researcher believes the benefits outweighed the risks.

Teachers are challenged daily in their classrooms and research suggests that these challenges are causing many teachers to leave who are passionate both about their work and the education of children. Additionally, the researcher observes that teachers are not afforded

a level of respect from both inside and outside of the educational area that the researcher believes to be appropriate.

The researcher believes that teachers enter the classroom after completing college and usually remain in isolation throughout their careers. Questions arise regarding potential growth opportunities for teachers, and whether opportunities are limited by the very structure and organizational characteristics of school.

The researcher's counseling background assisted in the questioning phase of the study. Opened ended questions such as "What is your impression ...", "How would you describe ...", and "Where do you see ..." will be some of the types of questions that were asked in the survey.

The researcher had a professional relationship with the participants in the study, and as the "primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 20) the researcher did "respond to the situation by maximizing opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information" (p. 20). However, as a human being, the researcher realized that mistakes would be made and an effort was made to minimize mistakes. Another helpful characteristic during the questioning phase included having "an enormous tolerance for ambiguity" (Merriam, 1998, p. 20).

Since qualitative research lacks specific protocols, the researcher had to be intuitive during the process and adapt when necessary relative to the process of "designing the study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 21) collecting, and analyzing data. The researcher remained sensitive during the study, which is another necessary characteristic while conducting qualitative research. Additionally, a level of sensitivity covered all facets of the study including the

context and all the variables within it that included the physical setting, the people, the overt and covert agenda, and the nonverbal behaviors. Finally, a level of sensitivity was maintained relative to the information content, the information gleaned from the content, and a level of sensitivity relative to acquiring subsequent data that could be influenced by the current data.

Having good communication skills were necessary for the researcher who served as an instrument in the study relative to questioning participants; establishing good rapport; empathizing with participants, and exercising listening skills (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). The researcher was ethical, cordial, and honest at all times and assured anonymity to the participants and assurance that the data will be destroyed when the study is concluded in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Additionally, since the researcher was previously an assistant principal in the district in which the study was conducted, the researcher was aware of her position and how crafting questions within the perimeters of leadership may have affected responses from participants.

Limitations of the Study

The limited time available to spend in the field by the researcher was a limitation of the study. Complete candor of participants may also have been a limitation in light of the mandated implementation of PLCs in the county. Teachers may have been hesitant to give absolutely honest responses to questions since the researcher was previously an assistant principal in the district. The researcher's bias may have also be a limitation to the study. The researcher truly believes in the power of PLCs and believes it to be a reform whose time has come that will not fall by the wayside. Further limitations include the fact that the study was limited to a small select sample of eight relatively inexperienced teachers working in PLCs in

one school in a southeastern state. Accordingly, the results may not be generalizable to other schools in the district, to other districts in the state, or to teachers in PLCs in schools in other states. Finally, teachers' perceptions of the influence of PLCs on teacher retention are dependent on the quality and functioning of the PLC in each department. It should also be noted that this PLC model may be unique, especially regarding the total involvement of mentors in beginning teachers' PLCs and subject matter PLCs. This model may not be representative of all PLCs, since it is possible to have mentors programs that do not have PLCs and PLC programs that do not include mentors.

Ethical Issues

Before undertaking any study in any school, approval must be requested from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at North Carolina State University and the procedures as set forth by the IRB must be strictly followed. A written request was made to the southeastern school district for approval to conduct the study and the principal of the designated high school was also contacted to agree to allow the study to be conducted at his school. Confidentiality was maintained for each participant and for the name of the school involved in the study. Risks for participants included giving information that they did not intend to share during the interview and feeling threatened by the researcher's position as a previous assistant principal. Confidentiality was assured to teachers participating in the study. Questions were designed in a non-threatening manner and were focused more towards teachers' perceptions of PLCs rather than being judgmental towards participants. Participants were also requested to sign agreements to participate in the study and were free to discontinue their participation at any point during the study.

Summary of Chapter III

This qualitative case study addressed the topic of teacher retention and PLCs. Resources for data collection included transcribed interviews, documents and field notes. Data analysis was covered and topics of validity and reliability were also discussed. Ethical concerns were addressed as were the limitations of the study. Chapter IV presents the findings of this qualitative case study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter Four discusses findings for the following two research questions: What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of Professional Learning Communities? How are beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities? Participants' collective perspectives of PLCs along with individual statements that further illustrate perceptions were examined. Beginning teachers' individual responses and direct quotes helped to capture perceptions of teachers who were involved in this study. Interviews were analyzed and emerging themes or patterns from the interviews will be discussed. Data analysis for this study involved two steps. The first step was a within-case analysis and the second step was a cross-case analysis of the data (Merriam, 2009). Merriam states that the "findings can be in the form of organized descriptive accounts, themes, or categories that cut across the data, or in the form of models and theories that explain the data" (p. 176). This study looked for emerging themes to help explain the meaning of the collected data.

This study placed a focus on the perceptions of beginning teachers who had been involved with PLCs in an effort to examine how their perceptions influence their decisions to remain or leave the teaching profession. A qualitative case study method was used to gather data related to the perceptions of teachers. Beginning teachers with no more than six years of involvement, and no less than one year with PLCs, were selected to be interviewed. Beginning teachers who met these criteria would have experiences with PLCs that would give them with a frame of reference from which to share.

Participants

The process of selecting participants who were willing to become part of this study involved contacting the Data and Accountability Department in the district office of southeastern county. After receiving permission from the district to conduct the study, the researcher contacted the principal of the school with a request to interview beginning teachers who fit the criteria for the study. A letter explaining the requirements of the study along with approval papers from the district office were sent to the principal of the school. The researcher also requested a list of all Beginning Teachers I, Beginning Teachers II, and Beginning Teachers III, who met the criteria for participation.

The principal of the school advised the researcher that a beginning teachers' PLC was planned. He gave the researcher the assistant principal's name, and advised the researcher to contact the assistant principal to see if the researcher could get on the agenda at the upcoming PLC meeting. The assistant principal and the researcher spoke by phone and also exchanged e-mails. The researcher attended the beginning teachers' PLC and had spoke with the beginning teachers along with their mentors. The researcher explained the timeframe and purpose of the study and handed out letters that explained the purpose of the study and other information as well as an informed consent form for research to each beginning teacher in attendance. The assistant principal was instrumental in providing names of beginning teachers who were eligible to participate in the study, and with following up and allowing the researcher to speak at beginning teachers' PLCs for which she was responsible.

Following the beginning teachers' PLC meeting, the researcher sent an introductory e-mail to all beginning teachers whose names were on the list, and included the cover letter

of introduction and the informed consent form for research that had also been given out at the beginning teachers' PLC meeting. A request was made that the forms be signed and returned to a staff member by a specified date. After receiving the cover letter and the informed consent form the researcher scheduled interviews with teacher participants who agreed to be a part of the study.

Purposeful sampling was used to help identify teachers who qualified to participate in the study. Eligible participants were selected based on criteria of having at least one year, but not more than six years of experience with PLCs at the designated high school. Interviews were conducted in a private area in the media center and were one-on-one, face-to-face and ranged from 25 minutes to almost an hour. All interviews were recorded with digital recorders and all participants agreed to being recorded. The two beginning teachers who agreed to participate in the study prior to permission being given to interview on campus were interviewed off campus as required by the NCSU Institutional Review Board. Each participant was assigned a fictitious name that was known only to the participant and the researcher in order to ensure protection of their identities.

Themes

After a thorough examination of the data, that included transcribing the interviews, carefully reviewing the transcriptions, reviewing the researcher's handwritten field notes, and coding the transcribed data, three major themes emerged relative to beginning teachers' perceptions of Professional Learning Communities:

1. Curricular concerns
2. A Supportive school culture

3. Teacher mentors

These themes were recurring responses throughout the interviews with participants. Participants may have used different words, but managed to convey the same meaning in their answers.

While the Professional Learning Community meetings were the major factors of the three themes in this study, PLCs were the vehicle through which the themes were manifested or were made visible. By design PLCs may present a platform whereby the articulated needs of all teachers are addressed; however, the needs of beginning teachers are critical as they navigate through their first few years in the profession. It is through this prism that beginning teachers' perceptions were viewed relative to Professional Learning Communities.

Curricular Concerns

All beginning teachers in this study addressed curricular matters from several vantage points, such as curriculum presentation, covering all required standards, using common pacing guide effectively, aligning lesson plans with the curriculum, sharing instructional strategies. The teacher participants also wanted to ensure that all students had the same learning experience. As a group, the participants were novice teachers in the truest sense of the word, as six teachers were Beginning Teachers I which means they were completing their first year of teaching and two were Beginning Teachers II and were completing their second year in the profession. While the group was new to teaching they were passionate and serious about the academic success of students and about their own personal success as an educator. For the six Beginning Teachers I coming to high school in a year that the curriculum was changing and new Common Core tests were being implemented, could have easily caused a

greater sense of frustration. The veteran teachers were also off balance since they too had never seen nor given the new Common Core tests. Despite these unique set of circumstances, the novice teachers appeared focused about their purpose of becoming the best teachers they could be and towards ensuring quality student learning.

Not only do new teachers spend much of their time searching for materials in their disciplines (Grossman & Thompson, 2008), they also must review the material to ensure that all state standards are met. Additionally, when novice teachers are teaching subjects for the first time, it is helpful when veteran teachers assist them in understanding the direction of their instruction. In response to a question regarding what PLCs had done to assist them in their day-to- day teaching experience, two teachers responded:

They [PLCs] have helped me go through the curriculum and make sure that the standards that were given that I'm hitting all the points. They [PLCs] have also helped me with finding entertaining labs for students to do—helped me with demonstrations. (*Ms. Jacobs*)

Well the PLC was just nice, being able to talk with people who teach the same subject if you never taught that subject before. So it was good to have them, kind of, you know, direct where it should be going rather than me just kind of looking at CMAP [curriculum mapping] and being like 'okay I guess this is what we are doing' [teacher and researcher laughs]. (*Mr. Johns*)

This remark came from a novice teacher after he attended a PLC meeting:

Everyone is scared about the Common Core tests because no one knows what is going to be on them. Everyone is scared because no one knows what's gonna be on it and our job performance is linked with it. It's personally used to measure our job performance. So we will be judged on how well the kids do on it. (*Mr. Phillips*)

As stated by participants, curriculum delivery to students had also been affected by PLCs at Noble High. Massey (2013) discusses five strategies that beginning teachers expressed as being supportive of new teachers and may also help with retention. Grading papers, and navigating the curriculum together, is listed among the five strategies. New teachers need support that veteran teachers are able to offer. This in turn may help to reduce time that novice teachers spend on creating worksheets and on their daily class preparation. Two novice teachers stated:

Just the fact that their friends in other classes were all together—Like they can go and study together or all look at the same worksheets—And we may have mixed some worksheets a little bit [but] in general the same topic day by day, we were doing the same thing. (*Ms. Chandler*)

I would say they [students] have been affected positively. I mean I learned things at PLCs about testing [and] how to do exercises. I mean the whole gambit of instruction from how to do the lectures to worksheets to exercises and just other veterans sharing how they were doing things and

what they had learned. I think it was good for my students and that I didn't have to make the same mistake twice or with them. (*Ms. Hawaii*)

Beginning teachers addressed the creation of assessments during common planning periods. The assessments focused not only on students receiving the same instruction, but also on teachers working together. Instead of individual teachers spending excessive time writing assessments, collective efforts helped novice teachers save time, resulted in an enhanced assessment tool, and benefited students. Jones (2012) determined that novice teachers need help in student preparation for "high stakes" (p. 74) testing. A beginning teacher who was actively involved in creating Math assessments stated the following:

For the math PLC I felt like they were affected obviously by the assessment because the big focus was doing the assessments. We also had common planning. We created a schedule and it was a living document and we could change it as we went but it said 'this is what we are planning, these are the topics we are planning to be on for these days and this and this and this' and it shows the progression. [So] in theory every class should have been on the same page every single day. So should – every single [class] of that type of Math, not in Geometry, but all of the Common Core Math IB classes should have been on the very same topic, doing the exact same things. A lot of us used the same worksheets. It helps for continuity for kids and kids in different classes. (*Ms. Isabelle*)

During the interviews, the beginning teachers were clearly cognizant of the importance of ensuring that the curriculum was understood and organized. Additionally, that the curriculum was presented to students in a manner that supported a good learning experience for all students, across all disciplines. Curricular views, as stated by beginning teachers in the current study, are also supported by current research literature. The researcher did not anticipate that curriculum issues would be the greatest concern for beginning teachers. It was a delightful discovery since the primary reasons individuals enter the teaching profession is to instruct students. The researcher anticipated that student discipline would be the primary concern for beginning teachers, based on her past experience at both the high and middle school levels, and based on the literature review. During visits to Noble High the researcher noted a well behaved and polite student body. Even during class changes, students move about the building in an orderly fashion with a reduced noise level. At the end of the school day, as students were dismissed from school, they exited the building in an orderly fashion, whether they left by on foot, by car, or by bus. It is entirely possible that students at Noble High are exceptional in matters of good behavior. Often novice teachers must ensure that their classes are orderly before effective instruction can take place. Since discipline issues were not a major concern, novice teachers were able to place more emphasis on curriculum delivery concerns.

Massey (2013) examines new teachers' responses relative to support for, and retention of, new teachers. Teacher responses spoke to mentorships that are planned and to the creation of a Professional Learning Community. In an interview with five beginning teachers Bieler (2013) received input from the novice teachers that recommended five

strategies toward crafting a [school] community that included teachers sharing ideas and friendships; grading papers and navigating the curriculum together; handling student discipline together; observing one another and reflecting together. Of special note is Bieler's observation that perceptions of new teachers were moving away from the concept of having a closed door while teaching and were instead seeking collaboration with colleagues.

Le Maistre and Pare (2010) discuss survival difficulties experienced by all teachers but are especially difficult for beginning teachers early in their careers and determined that:

The increasing complexity of teachers' workloads has been explained by a number of factors: greater societal expectations and lower societal recognition; greater accountability to parents and policy-makers; pedagogical and curriculum changes being implemented at an increasing rate: increased need for technological competence; increased demands beyond the pedagogical task; increasing diversity among students; and more administrative work. (p. 560)

While acknowledging that "these pressures are true for all teachers, the situation for beginners is even worse. No other profession takes newly certified graduates, places them in the same situation as seasoned veterans and gives them no organized support" (Le Maistre & Pare, 2010, p. 560). In addition to the complex factors previously mentioned that include accelerated curriculum changes, new teachers are also interested in learning how to offer differentiated instruction to a diversified student population which may support their desires to have reduced class sizes as well (Rochkind, Ott, Immerwahr, Doble, & Johnson, 2008). Additionally in order to become more effective instructors, novice teachers need opportunities to learn about "grade-level curriculum standards, instructional resources,

curriculum implementation and differentiated instruction based on individual students needs and assessment data” (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010, p. 302).

In presenting curricular related matters from a beginning teacher’s perspective, Jones (2012) reiterates:

New teachers should be encouraged to simplify and focus on creating and delivering great lessons. A lighter workload that takes into account the fact that these teachers are developing new lessons each day will improve new teachers’ sense of well-being. It might also raise their student’s achievement because the teachers will have time to prepare more effective lessons and hone their teaching skills. Less outside-the-classroom responsibility means more planning and reflection time for new teachers, who need it most. (p. 74)

In the Stamford Connecticut public school district, after a three year PLC implementation period, and student gains that exceeded state gains particularly in mathematics, Thessin and Starr (2011) determined that although “no one reform can be cited for Stamford’s improvements but teachers clearly believe that PLCs have helped them improve their practice” (p. 54). For example one learning needs coach reported that:

PLCs have afforded us dedicated time on a weekly basis to discuss and share best practice strategies with colleagues in order to meet the individual needs of students. Prior to having this time, we had no way to learn what a teacher who may have had a lot of success in teaching a specific skill had actually done in the classroom to yield those results. (p. 54)

All in all “by providing teachers with the time to collaborate and the necessary supports to build high-functioning learning teams, districts and schools can begin to ensure that teachers become effective team members and, as a result, effective instructors in the classroom” (Thessin & Starr, 2011, p. 54).

Supportive School Culture

Schools that operate as effective PLCs are likely to have a supportive school culture. As one attempts to examine the relationship between PLCs and a school’s culture, it is necessary to recognize that every school has an “undercurrent of thoughts, values, beliefs and ideas about learning and teaching” (Thigpen, 2011, p. 13); and the daily activities of the school are guided by those factors. In keeping with the concept of having a supportive school culture, it is also necessary that each employee in the school assumes responsibility for ensuring that teachers have what they needed for instruction delivery. This is especially true for beginning teachers, who face many challenges during their early years. For this study, beginning teachers expressed their perception of feeling supported with comments such as:

Well, I never had any problem getting any help when I needed it. Always I had a very supportive department, a very supportive hallway, even people who were not in the same department—if I ever had a question [and] sent an e-mail to anybody they always responded very quickly. Always felt that I could ask anyone anything that I needed to know. I felt very supported you know in this school. (*Ms. Hawaii*)

Overall, beginning teachers would benefit by not having to rotate from classroom to classroom at all. Veteran teachers in the Science PLCs supported

beginning teachers by switching classrooms that allowed novice teachers to have smoother class transitions. One Science teacher stated:

My PLC has been very supportive as well. Being a rotating teacher who doesn't have all Science classrooms, they have also offered to switch classrooms with me so that I can do labs in their larger rooms and that has been really nice and helpful. (*Ms. Jacobs*)

Starting the school year as a beginning teacher is already hectic, however starting as a new hire after the semester is underway, makes for a more difficult transition. One new teacher, who came in mid-semester, shared her perception of how PLCs members were supportive and responded to her need for information:

Very good because I came in mid-semester and it was very overwhelming and everyone was [already] there; and even though they had to slow down and spout some things out for me no one ever acted annoyed about it. You know, very helpful. (*Ms. Rhodes*)

During the monthly beginning teachers' PLCs, new teachers had an opportunity to give input regarding topics that were important, and of special interest to them. PLCs offered support to beginning teachers by giving them a chance to vote on the topics that would be discussed in the PLC meetings.

Undoubtedly novice teachers felt a sense of empowerment since they were able to have a say in what was of interest and of importance to them. One novice teacher stated:

I think they are pretty supportive of the beginning teachers. We have a monthly beginning teachers' meeting which we are having one tomorrow which I have to miss because I have an IEP (Individual Education Plan) meeting, but it's been pretty supportive. My first day there we had an agenda, but we had to vote on the most important issues on a scale from 1-10 on things like classroom management [and] what was important to us and we focused on the top four or five areas that everyone was saying was important to them. Pretty much what we did with that. We had a classroom management one; how [to write an] effective lesson plan one. This one tomorrow is going to be sort of a celebration, that's why I feel like I can miss it a little bit. I'll try to get in after the IEP meeting. (*Mr. Phillips*)

These beginning teachers' comments articulated how teachers perceived different ways that Noble High School offered support through PLCs in response to challenges faced by beginning teachers. Support came not only from departments to which the novice teachers belonged, but also came from other departments and seemed to promote a sense of school-wide support. Additionally, most beginning teachers found their monthly PLC meetings to be supportive in terms of having curricular concerns that were expressed as being important and to have those issues addressed at their meetings.

Two beginning teachers expressed concern that they did not feel supported by their PLCs. The teachers stated:

I was on my own kind of thing. I knew a PLC activity was expected but I had to search them out myself, there wasn't like somebody you know came to me and said 'here is the PLC for this course, the PLC for this course, you need to contact so and so', so I had to worm my way in on my own. (*Ms. Hawaii*)

I'm not honestly aware of any support through the PLCs specifically. I don't feel like the beginning teacher stuff was mostly the after school meetings once a month and that's where we were supposed to be getting support. I didn't really feel any support through the PLC process as a beginning teacher. (*Ms. Isabelle*)

Suggestions for retaining beginning teachers related to support were passionate in terms of consequences for lack of support:

The staff has been very supportive, that's got to be by far probably actually like the main retention for beginning teachers. If I didn't feel supported I'd be done. I wouldn't want to come back. I wouldn't come back to this school, you know, and then I would be weary to teach anywhere cause it's definitely hard on the beginners and just having people there like if you have a question you can ask – you know was enough for me and I mean they were very – 'Doing okay' and you know—So I guess just a good supportive staff in general, administration also and that can be very helpful. (*Ms. Chandler*)

In general, participants expressed a strong need for a supportive school culture, and gave specific ways support was, or was not offered through PLCs. Novice teachers seemed particularly appreciative when the school responded to challenges that appeared to interfere with the smooth flow of daily functions. Clearly a strong supportive school culture was an important factor to beginning teachers, and more importantly, the majority of teachers felt supported through their PLCs. It is also important that the reasons the two teachers who did not feel supported through their PLCs are addressed.

While addressing school culture, Ferguson and Johnson (2012) believe that:

Schools function best when a culture of trust exists and the work environment conveys a sense of security and collaboration, whereby innovation is encouraged and cultivated and beginning teachers are valued and supported. To foster this professional learning community, effective school leaders strive to create supportive, respectful, and friendly school environments that develop beginning teachers as successful educators. (p. 2)

In a Texas study, Williams (2013) sought to determine differences in passing reading percentages for students at elementary, middle and high schools while PLCs were being implemented on a district-wide level; and further sought to determine how teachers perceived PLC activities and the impact of PLCs on the reading program. Three themes emerged from the study; data-driven decisions, curriculum, instruction, and student learning and school culture (p. 37). Regarding the school culture finding Williams (2013) reports that:

Several patterns emerged from teacher responses by subject level, academic-performance ratings, ethnicity, gender and experience. Most notable was that all

teachers agreed that professional collaboration was implemented on their campuses. Moreover, teachers at the high-performing schools found that collaborating before school, in the hallways, during lunchtime, and other times of the day was just as helpful as scheduled PLCs. A collaborative culture assured that all teachers had a forum for questions and problem-solving. (p. 37)

In this study schools where PLCs appeared to be embedded in the schools' culture Williams (2013) reported an 80 percent and 90 percent passing rate on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) as opposed to schools that had less collaboration that reported a 70 percent rate of passing on the TAKS. Hence the schools efforts toward creating a supportive collaborative culture helped teachers in their perceptions of a positive school culture.

Teacher Mentors

Teacher mentor programs can exist independently without PLCs, and PLC programs can exist independently without mentors. However in this study, mentors were an important part of PLCs as articulated by participants. According to beginning teachers, the mentor support that was offered through PLCs was phenomenal. Mentors attended both the beginning teachers' PLCs, and subject matter PLCs, in addition to having mandatory weekly meeting. All beginning teachers reported having positive experiences with their mentors and felt overall that their mentors played a huge role in helping them through what they believe will be one of the most challenging times of their profession, their first year. While responding to the question that asked them to describe how their school responded to their first year challenges as new teachers, participants answered:

Well they have a Beginning Teacher's program so I had a mentor that I could talk to on a weekly basis. She gave me her cell phone number in the event that I ever needed to contact her outside of school which was really helpful. (*Ms. Jacobs*)

I have a mentor teacher who I feel has been really a great help. She has just been there to just encourage me along the way. Anytime I would just come and complain I just wanted to complain, but she was trying to fix my problem. Normally [she] did have really good suggestions and I really appreciated that. (*Mr. Johns*)

Another teacher was assigned a mentor outside of her department and the teacher believed strongly because of the paperwork demands, it would be best if her mentor came from her department. The teacher also was told she would have to meet with the mentor weekly and the teacher responded:

And I was like "Are you kidding me?", I am bogged down with stuff, this is going to be awful and my mentor has been amazing. She's been the biggest help. We have weekly meetings, we meet once a week for lunch and you know just during our lunch period and sit and talk about school and things—But she's also been wonderful in letting me—I can come to her with any question and she really—I know that's what mentors are supposed to do but I feel like a lot don't. She really does everything I need and goes above and beyond. If I ask her a question that is not even

necessarily related you know, “Who do I ask about this?” She’s like “I don’t know, let me e-mail and find out.” So she will always, even when she doesn’t know, she will e-mail whoever she needs to until she gets the answer and come back to me and that’s been really valuable to have her as an asset and go to her. I have gone to her before school or after school, whatever and she will check in periodically even if she knows I am having a rough week and we have already had our lunch meeting; she will just stop by my room and stick her head in or e-mail and say “How are you doing? Just stopped by.” And so my mentor has been actually the best thing this semester I think. (*Ms. Isabelle*)

A second specific question regarding mentoring asked participants about the extent that mentoring or coaching had been a part of their experience as a new teacher. Teachers generally responded that they saw their mentors weekly because it was mandatory. However, they also saw their mentors in the beginning teachers’ PLCs and subject matter PLCs. Additionally, teachers often check in with their mentors several times a week, or their mentors check in on them several times weekly. Some mentors even made themselves available before and/or after school, and in general, were easily accessible and available. Further, it appeared that beginning teachers perceived that were special and important to their mentors. As beginning teachers spoke about their mentors, they became animated and excited in their speech, and some even had a sparkle in their eyes as they reflected on the importance and significance of their mentors. The researcher knew from experience that effective mentors brought added value to mentor programs, however these mentors were exceptionally

devoted to their mentees, and the beginning teachers appreciated that devotion. Participants responded with comments such as:

Again I have my mentor in my PLC. I see her once a week and then I see her in my beginning teachers' [meeting] so I've almost got double mentoring. I can check in with her every two or three days so that was a good situation. (*Ms. Rhodes*)

Mr. Johns added:

I think they [mentors] do well. Just having someone that I know I can talk to and you know cause often time—this is a very big school so you may have questions but not really know where to go with those questions. And just having someone you can go to and if she might not be the right person, she at least will help me find the right person to take those questions.

Another participant who had previously done her student teaching in southeastern county and had seen how the mentor program worked was excited that she was eligible to have her own mentor. She wanted to know all of the particulars about the program and wanted to take advantage of the program immediately. Her response to the question was:

Yes, mentor program, it's something that I knew was offered or I knew was required of new teachers in southeastern county. And coming into the profession I wanted to know right off the bat who was my mentor; how was this going to work; when can we meet; what can you teach me. (*Ms. Apple*)

While all participants' comments were positive about their personal experiences with their own mentors, one teacher expressed an opinion relative to the school paying closer attention to the choice of mentors:

I think schools need to pay a lot of attention to who they choose as mentor. Say for example they didn't choose anyone in my department and I don't know why – if no one was willing, if no one had the right level of experience or who knows. I know that two other teachers were new to my department this year so they wouldn't have been mentoring. I don't know about the other teachers. (*Ms. Isabelle*)

All participants seemed to be on the same page relative to their positive interactions with their mentors, and the support that mentors provided through PLCs. Mentors were also cross-disciplined and were effective in their interactions with beginning teachers. Clearly this PLC mentor model offered exceptional support to these novice teachers. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine this relationship more closely, it may be a topic worthy of further study.

Beginning teachers at Noble High are not alone in their perceptions of needed support, and the support they received. The literature discusses the different types of support novice teachers seek and support mentors provide. On a national basis novice teachers are matched with qualified mentors who provide support on both an instructional and psychological level (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010). While explaining how mentors and beginning teachers interact, Ferguson and Johnson (2010) give meaning to the beginning teacher and mentor interaction:

For example, beginning teachers seek opportunities to learn from their mentor teachers about enculturation, effective classroom management strategies, grade-level curriculum standards, instructional resources, curriculum implementation, and differentiated instruction based on individual student needs and assessment data. Effective mentor teachers provide this support and reflect on their vision of good teaching and on their own practices as mentors. (p. 2)

As previously discussed, beginning teachers were concerned about curricular presentation and were pleased when their concerns were addressed both in their PLC meetings and by their individual mentors.

Mentors also benefit from their role as mentoring novice teachers, and as reported by Le Maistre and Pare (2010) believe that while responding to questions from newcomers, mentors become self reflective of their practices. Mentors further believe that:

a mentoring dyad is often beneficial to both members. The presence of a mentoring program in a school helps the school to be a learning community. There is a multiplier effect, as students continue to be affected by better teachers. Being asked to mentor newcomers is recognition of the expertise of the mentors in any profession and gives them an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. (p. 560)

Although effective mentoring may bring benefits to both newcomers and mentors, it is a time consuming activity for mentors and usually takes place outside of the regular school day or even during lunchtime, and often veteran teachers are consumed with their classes which leave little time to assist novice teachers (Le Maistre & Pare, 2010). It would be interesting, and probably helpful, to gain insight from mentors regarding their role in this particular

model. A model where mentors have provided wrap-around services to beginning teachers through PLCs. Thoughts arise as to how mentors are able to manage their own responsibilities, and are readily available to their mentees. The researcher is especially interested in hearing mentors explain what they believe is the magic formula that makes their mentees feel so supported and so special.

When asked if they had ever considered leaving the teaching profession and, if so why, answers from participants were both serious and answered with tongue in cheek. The first beginning teacher's response indicated her strong feeling about the need for a PLC, and expectations that were clearly articulated. While at her previous school, in addition to feeling overwhelmed, she felt unsafe and felt that administration was unresponsive to teachers' needs. She contrasts that experience with her experience in her new county, and seemed pleased with the changes. This type of input is critically important because no meaningful instruction can take place if teachers do not feel safe in their classrooms, and in their schools. While PLCs do not address all concerns expressed by this teacher, it was obvious that the PLCs and other administrative support have made a difference in her teaching experience. She stated the following:

A couple of years ago I considered it due to a school, not in this district.

There was a school where they didn't have beginning teachers [or] PLCs, any meetings and all the expectations were unspoken. And in this district I felt very *very* much overwhelmed and alone and there was also a security issue where administration was not helping beginning teachers with discipline in the classroom or if we wrote up a referral they weren't taking

action very quickly and I almost felt a security issue where I felt unsafe in my room. But since I have been here in southeastern [county] nothing at all has happened since then and its almost disproved that that's the norm, so thankfully and wonderful. (*Ms. Rhodes*)

Another teacher expressed concern about paying off her scholarship requirement that required that she work for a specified number of years. She indicated that if she decided to leave, it would not be for reasons that involved teaching, but rather for external factors. She stated:

Yes, I am one-hundred percent debt free as long as I can keep that scholarship paid off. So I mean the biggest complaint and its one that every teacher struggles with is pay. And you know I'm young and I am looking forward to starting a family you know in the next few years and I don't whether I can do that on a teacher's salary. [When asked about the possibility of pursuing a Master's degree to enhance pay teacher responded] And I might. So I am telling myself yes, I'm telling myself that at the end of my four years I am going to re-evaluate you know, look at my life and see if I have the motivation to go for a higher degree. Do I have family, do I have kids? Do I need to make more money you know; do I need to make more money to support my life? But as of right now it's not the teaching [that's] driving me out, it's all of the external factors that could possibly make me leave; but I'll reevaluate in three years. (*Ms. Apple*)

Another teacher discussed the stress factor involved with teaching, along with issues of pay. Ultimately, according to this teacher, teachers do not leave

because of their love of teaching. The researcher sensed that support from the staff and administration was critically important to this teacher's decision to remain in the profession. She shared the following:

It is very stressful and the pay is not wonderful. I mean it does – it can be frustrating. My husband and I want to buy a house and we can't afford to at this point on a beginning teacher's salary. So there are—you know—every once and a while [when] you think about things like that or you do have a really rough day with kids yelling or throwing things at you and or whatever and you are like 'Do they pay me enough for this?' I don't know but I think a lot of people ultimately when they don't leave, they don't when they love teaching. It's a lot to handle the kids and then—depending on if you don't feel support from your school and your staff and the administration is huge—knowing if you are going to have support from all those people, that's what really makes sense. Kids will be a handful anywhere, but it's what you can handle and what—and how supported you feel. (*Ms. Isabelle*)

Concerns regarding teachers not receiving pay raises for several years were also discussed as reasons teachers consider leaving. Additionally, one novice teacher reflected on her transition from student teaching to becoming an actual teacher, and focused on the many skills teachers need in the classroom. She concluded that people just cannot understand what is involved until they actually taught. She stated:

I have considered it. [Slight laughter]. The reason why is there has not been a pay increase in x amount of years, it's tough work and you have to—like people think that 'Oh you can just sit on the computer and let the kids do whatever they want [to] in the classroom and it's not that. There are so many different things that—your mind has to be alert; you have to be thinking of what you are going to teach next; you have to think of what Bobby Joe is doing in the back of the classroom that is distracting to others. There is just a whole lot more than what I realized when I—[went from] student teaching to actually being the teacher in the classroom. There is a lot more that goes into teaching than just 'Oh teach the lesson' and think that the kids learn it. So there is a lot more to it that people just don't understand until they do it. (*Ms. Jacobs*)

Certain students will always test the waters to determine what they can or cannot get away with, and often with beginning teachers. While this novice teacher acknowledged that she has yet to learn to deal how to deal with difficult students, she believes that it is a skill that will come with time. Ms. Hawaii added:

You always have bad days [laughter]. I mean there are—seriously no, I mean yea, you have fleeting thoughts about—especially [with] particular students—that is the hard thing for me. I mean difficult. I haven't learned yet how to deal with difficult students you know and I think that is something that just comes with time.

One teacher reflected on his thoughts about being a professor and teaching

his subject rather than having to deal with irresponsible children, and grading lots of papers. He stated:

Oh I mean there are always those days [laughter], everyone has those days no matter what job they have. There are days when I just, more than one day, when I think being a professor would be nice, cause then you get—you're able to have the kid be responsible for themselves and you get to just teach the subject. But most days that's not really what I want, [mostly] days when [you're] having particularly irresponsible kids and grading a lot of papers. (*Mr. Johns*)

One teacher's response was funny to the point that both the teacher and researcher shared a hearty laugh. She stated:

[Laughter] Well I've had my moments. I mean again I'm very new, I haven't taught a whole *whole* year yet, so there are definitely moments I like—am I sure every teacher even [those] working ten years, twenty years has moments where they are like 'I can't take anymore' [greater laughter from both teacher and researcher] cause there are definitely ups and down where many weeks I was like in tears and I'm like 'What was I thinking?' 'I'm not going back in August, I'll sub, we'll be fine' and the next week I'm like 'This isn't bad.' You know-- like you get—there were moments that you get overwhelmed and it gets busy and – but I don't know, like for me if that would—I don't know that it would end up being enough. I feel like the more experience I get the better, even just this little bit –and like

you know what I mean—makes it a little bit easier. So my thought is sticking with it. (*Ms. Chandler*)

After answering the question on thoughts of leaving the profession, participants were subsequently asked, “What characteristics of PLCs if any supported or influenced your decision to stay?” Ms. Rhodes described challenges she faced as a first year teacher at her previous school, and described her high level of frustration. She also discussed the possibility of staying at her previous school had she received the help she needed. She shared her perception of her experiences as a novice teacher at her previous school. Her perception of being supported through PLCs is a part of her experience at her new school. She stated:

At the other district the lack of PLCs, the lack of meetings and sort of collaboration definitely there was no accountability. And again, I felt very much sort of like I was drowning. Just like I didn’t know what was expected and coming in as a new teacher that you know, [is] very *very* frustrating. So that was definitely one of those things. Had I had help, perhaps I would have been able to stay [if] I would have felt more supported.

This teacher’s response to the question, while brief, seemed powerful to the researcher. The teacher spoke of not being able to imagine being a first year teacher without a PLC, and also spoke about the collaborative nature of PLCs. Unquestionably this teacher’s perceptions of this model of PLCs at this high school is positive. She added:

It kind of goes back to “I couldn’t imagine being a first year teacher without a PLC”. So I mean –imagine you will still find ways to collaborate with other teachers and get resources, but having this specific time and the requirement that you need to meet is helpful because you have to do it, if not like you’re on someone’s back, you’re like ‘Please meet with me so we can share materials.

Ms. Isabelle focused on shared resources and materials, and how through PLCs, teachers’ collective efforts were helpful toward removing feelings of isolation. She also spoke to the value of being in a large school where multiple teachers taught the same subjects and being able to share ideas and work on lesson plans. She added:

I would say looking at it from the stand point of if I had been a Math teacher in the Math PLC or if I had been in the Special Ed—having those common assessments and having those common activities that you created, I think really helps keep a teacher from feeling like they are alone and they are trying to create all of these new things on their own. Cause I know when my Mom started teaching twenty plus thirty years ago, they didn’t do this. And so she had to create all her stuff even if there were other people doing the exact same thing. Everyone had their own assignments, their own lesson plans and part of it was the whole, first you’re struggling to set up all your materials yourself and I’ve heard from my bother also. My brother teaches in [another state] and – [teaches] high

school science. And so I've heard that with groups that don't PLC properly-- He is in such a -- or in a different unit, he is in such a small school he is the only person that teaches the classes that he teaches. So he has to create all his lesson plans and that's where a lot of his time is spent, working and critiquing. So I think PLCs—especially in a school this large—we have multiple teachers teaching the same subject. I think they're helpful because you have other people to bounce ideas off of and work out plans and --and so we spent an hour after school every week, and hour and a half usually—but we got a lot done for the upcoming week and there was less that everyone had to go do separately.

The idea of being supported and having good relationships with colleagues through PLCs resonated throughout the interviews and were expressed in different ways, for example Ms. Jacobs stated:

Again, it's the people who are in the PLCs encouraging [you]. If you don't have the good relationship with co-workers that's supportive and nurturing and if you don't have that kind of connection, chemistry, however you want to word it that to me would make it really hard for me to want to stay. Like if I felt that the PLC absolutely didn't like me as a person, I think I would leave. But they are very friendly. They are open to share their materials, [and to] giving me advice when I need it which has been great. So they are part of the reason I would continue to stay in the teaching profession.

Ms. Hawaii added:

I would say the relationships that I have built thorough PLC's have definitely, I mean encouraged me to be here. I mean one of the great things about this job is the people that I work with. So those positive relationships have definitely made me happy.

Mr. Johns viewed the support system through PLCs as being reciprocal and stated:

I wouldn't really say any in particular, other than just another community of teachers and generally we try and support each other. So on bad days they would support me and I would try and support them.

One teacher discussed the importance of PLCs relative to seeking a teaching position, and to her preference of going to a school that had a good PLC. She stated that without the support she received from PLCs, she might become "run down" thus causing her to leave teaching earlier than she planned. She shared:

I would definitely—even if like looking for jobs in the teaching profession, would prefer to go to a school that might have – if I knew it had a good PLC or like I would like to just stay here because of their—like, you know, I like it here and I like the PLC and I don't want to—But there are some schools that I have heard maybe from other teachers, you know that maybe don't have a strong support system, and I am much more leery of wanting to work there. And ultimately, like if I just had to—I don't know that without that support, like I don't know in the long run it

may wear me down more and I might want to quit earlier or you know—
cause it's definitely nice to have that support. (*Ms. Chandler*)

Participants stated various reasons that supported or influenced their decisions to stay in teaching, which included receiving encouraging words from supportive relationships; friendly and supportive PLCs; working on common assessments together that helped teachers not to feel alone; and in general helped teachers feel supported during their day-to-day teaching experiences.

Current literature also supports participants' view on feelings of school-wide support. According to a study by Ferguson and Johnson (2010) that looked at how beginning teachers viewed school friendly environments, it was determined that the concept of school-wide support represents not only mortar and brick in a school building; it also includes working on building relationships with administrators, colleagues, and staff members. Further, the concept encourages communication and collaboration between teachers and staff members. An environment of this nature helps to foster a feeling of belonging to the school community in addition to bringing a sense of contentment, one of feeling safe and feeling emotionally secure. Beginning teachers in the study identified the front office staff as being supportive and helping them to have a pleasant experience while signing in first thing in the morning and getting them off to a good start. Staff members were also described as supportive, caring, friendly, and willing to share. The novice teachers also observed that large schools may present a barrier in getting to know everyone and when deliberate events are planned that include entire groups, it helped to promote a friendly and supportive environment.

Summary

Beginning high school teachers responses to interview questions sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of Professional Learning Communities?
 - 1A. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of mentoring in Professional Learning Communities?
2. How are beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay or leave influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities?

After a thorough analysis of the data, three themes emerged that related to beginning teachers' perceptions of their involvement with PLCs. The three themes were curricular concerns, a supportive school culture, and teacher mentors.

Beginning teachers expressed an interest in several curricula issues that were both necessary and essential to ensure effective instructional delivery. As new teachers they were expected to hit the ground running and to have the same end of year testing results as their veteran colleagues. As beginning teachers identified factors associated with curriculum delivery, it became apparent that these teachers were becoming equipped to handle the challenges of effectively teaching children. With experience, they would become more expert in their respective disciplines. PLC subject matter meetings provided instructional assistance to help beginning teachers with curricular concerns. Novice teachers perceived receiving help from PLC meetings that helped them to:

- Go through the curriculum to ensure all state standards were being covered.

- Collaborate with veteran teachers to gain guidance in curriculum mapping, or to understand more clearly where the curriculum was going.
- Become less fearful of the unknown relative to new Common Core testing.
- Become more efficient in student testing, teaching exercises, designing lectures and creating assessments.

Support for beginning teachers from an organizational level is an important part of their day-to-day experiences. Since information comes to them at a high rate of speed, support that helps with understanding processes and logistics is critically important. Overall, the beginning teachers felt they were supported and that people were helpful. Additionally, participants felt that there was an open door relative to asking almost anyone for help. This consistent openness to help beginning teachers may further support perceptions of a supportive and caring community. Participants expressed support as being necessary and important to their success as beginning teachers. A supportive school culture reflects an attitude that all faculty and staff are responsible for instructional delivery and for ensuring that all teachers, especially beginning teachers, receive needed assistance. Beginning teachers perceived their school as having a supportive school culture by:

- Having a supportive department and a supportive hallway and quick responses to e-mails and questions.
- Veteran teachers in PLC meetings switching classrooms with novice teachers to help with logistics and to help ensure smooth class transitions.

- Being sensitive to and answering the questions of a novice teacher who was not there for orientation, who asked many questions because he needed to get caught up.
- Having beginning teachers' PLCs that addressed topics that novice teachers felt to be important in their day-to-day teaching experiences.

Two novice teachers did not perceive that they were supported through their PLCs. One perceived that:

- Information for PLC location was not given to her.

The other teacher perceived:

- That she was not aware of receiving any support through PLCs specifically.

Although six out of eight beginning teachers perceived their school environment as being supportive, it is curious that one teacher did not feel supported at all. While two teachers stated not feeling supported, the first teacher, after finding the location of her PLC, made a suggestion that would help solve the problem. The second teacher's perception was different from the other novice teachers. It could be that the second teacher felt unsupported because she was unable to attend her departmental PLCs due to a scheduling conflict. She may have experienced a sense of loss by not being present, and by not receiving departmental information along with her colleagues. More than likely she received the information from her departmental chairperson at a subsequent time.

Participants stated that their mentors brought added value that went above and beyond what was expected, in order to ensure that novice teachers received needed help during their beginning years. All beginning teachers had positive things to say about their personal

mentors. One participant expressed concern about mentors not being chosen from all departments. Several beginning teachers expressed excitement at the accessibility of their mentors, and spoke about before and after school opportunities to see their mentors even after having had their weekly mandatory meeting. One mentor even shared her cell phone number with her beginning teacher and the beginning teacher thought it helpful. Participants also found it special when their mentors were in their subject matter PLCs which gave additional opportunities for professional growth. All beginning teachers were expressly pleased with their mentors and with the support and attention they received. The researcher was pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming positive perceptions that novice teachers had of their mentors. Only one concern surfaced, and that concern questioned how mentors were selected, and whether they were chosen from all departments. Overall beginning teachers perceived mentors as being a key response to their first year challenges as novice teachers. The PLC model at Noble High includes mentors in all PLC meetings. Additionally, mentors provide support to novice teachers through weekly mandatory meetings, and through informal check-ins during the week. During the interviews, before the researcher asked questions about mentors, novice teachers expressed their perceptions of mentors, and believed that mentors helped them by:

- Meeting with beginning teachers on a weekly basis.
- Listening to complaints and helping to offer solutions to problems.
- Answering questions, finding answers to questions, being available before/after school, and going above and beyond what was expected.

- Checking in more often on the teacher, when the mentor knew the teacher was having an especially difficult week.
- Allowing teachers to have almost double mentoring, because mentors were in beginning teachers PLCs, subject matter PLCs, and had mandatory meeting with the teacher.
- Just being available to talk to mentors, especially in a large school where novice teachers were not always certain about where to direct their questions.

While it is outside the scope of this study, an examination of the teacher mentor program that operates within this PLC model merits further study.

Examination of current literature supports how beginning teachers in this study view teacher mentors. According to Grossman and Davis (2012) research along with anecdotal support shows that novice teachers who are involved in an induction program and are assigned mentors tend to have a higher job satisfaction level, a higher commitment to their profession, and a higher level of retention. Additionally, in cases where novice teachers continue with their mentors for two years, mentor effectiveness may also increase.

The three emerging major themes: 1) curricular concerns 2) supportive school culture and 3) teacher mentors, were examined from an organizational perspective which has its roots in organizational theory. Kelly (2011) determined that a reasonable expectation can be supported that organizational conditions can affect teacher departure rates from schools when viewed through a “lens of attrition” (p.14).

This chapter discussed the findings that were the result of interviews with participants and the researcher’s field notes. Chapter Five will discuss findings in relation to previous

research. Also implications for further research will be discussed along with practical implications at both the building and the district levels.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of beginning high school teachers in a school in a southeastern state who were involved with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and to determine whether beginning teachers' perceptions of PLCs influenced their decisions to move, stay, or leave the profession altogether. Beginning teachers' decisions to remain in teaching is a spiraling concern shared by educational leaders since baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964 (Botwinik & Press, 2006) and who currently comprise 53 percent of current teachers, have started to retire and are scheduled to retire in record numbers in the next few years (Carroll, 2009). According to Corbell et al. (2010) 30 percent of novice teachers leave during their first three years and 50 percent leave within five years. Should beginning teachers continue to leave the profession at their present rates as veteran teachers retire, a teacher shortage is eminent. In response to the potential teacher shortage, it is incumbent upon professional leaders to establish policies and procedures that effectively recruit and retain novice classroom teachers.

According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2010), an increase in teacher retirements may create a need to hire between "2.9 and 5.1 million teachers between 2008 and 2020" (p. 9). Although newly hired teachers enter the profession in large numbers, many leave within the first three years and up to half leave within five years (Corbell, Osborne, & Reinman, 2010). As the profession simultaneously loses teachers on the front and back ends of the spectrum, it becomes evident that an examination of the

reasons beginning teachers leave is needed, and furthermore that reforms and strategies are implemented that address the problem of teacher attrition.

Financial costs surrounding teacher turnover are astronomical. Given the current novice teacher turnover trends, unless the trend changes no relief appears to be in sight. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2008) reports an annual cost exceeding \$84.5 million to replace public school teachers. Teachers who choose to transfer within the state cost taxpayers a total of \$188.5 million annually and this does not include costs associated with replacing retirees.

While not addressing the problem of teacher retention directly, PLCs as a school reform seek to bring a cultural shift that promotes school improvement, help to build organizational capacity, increase student academic achievement, enhance teacher professional development and collegiality, and increase teacher quality and effectiveness (Darling-Hammond 2006, 2005; DuFour et al., 2006; Hord, 1997; Morrisey, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Reeves, 2005; Stoll, et al., 2006).

PLCs by design have collaborative structures and processes that are embedded in the culture and are supported through defined processes and procedures. The researcher examined the perceptions that beginning teachers had of PLCs from an organizational perspective and further examined how their perceptions of PLCs influenced their decisions to move, stay, or leave teaching. While the literature is filled with studies that cover topics related to keeping qualified teachers in classrooms and mentoring and PLCs, few research studies are available that address organizational factors that relate to teacher turnover and staffing issues. Additionally, research on teacher attrition and retention is plentiful; however,

research that focuses on teacher retention and attrition as it relates to PLCs and what beginning teachers perceive about PLCs continue to be under-researched. The researcher's goal was to make a connection between PLCs and the way beginning teachers perceived their involvement with PLCs. Beginning teachers' perceptions were overall favorable with their involvement in PLCs and they also generally believed that without PLCs most of the beginning teachers would not plan to remain in teaching or to remain in teaching at Noble High school.

A qualitative case study approach as supported by Merriam (2009) was used to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of Professional Learning Communities?
 - 1A. What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of mentoring in Professional Learning Communities?
2. How are beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities?

The researcher interviewed eight teachers from one public high school in southeastern North Carolina. All interviews were conducted face to face in a setting that allowed participants to feel comfortable throughout the interview sessions. Anonymous names were used to protect the identity of the participants and to help maintain fidelity to the interview process. A semi-structured method was used to interview participants. Digital recording devices were used to record interviews and data were transcribed following the interviews. Participant responses were coded and analyzed and revealed themes and patterns that helped

give meaning to participants' responses. An analysis of the data helped to capture the perceptions of beginning teachers of PLCs and further captured how their perceptions influenced their decisions to move, leave, or stay in teaching.

Research by Hanushek and Rivkin (2007) shows that while conducting an analysis of organizational factors that affect teacher retention, approximately 25 percent "of teachers who leave schools [do so] because they are dissatisfied cite low salaries, lack of support from the school administration, student discipline problems and lack of teacher influence over decision making" (p. 77).

While making a comparing regarding reasons teachers leave, between the research literature and the researcher's study, it was determined that 37 percent of teachers had concerns about insufficient salaries. Twelve and one-half percent also believed that beginning teachers needed more support with student discipline. No teachers expressed concern about having a part in school-wide decision making. From the researcher's study, the 37 percent of teachers having concerns with insufficient salaries was greater than the 25 percent in the research literature. The fact that North Carolina teachers did not receive a salary increase for four consecutive years continues to be a concern for teachers. The 12.5 percent of teachers having a concern about receiving more help from administrators with student discipline is less than the 25 percent in the research literature. No teachers expressed concern about a lack of support from school administration. Regarding teachers who expressed concerns that were similar to the literature, it is important that their concerns are addressed and resolved if possible. Retention rates could possibly be enhanced if educational leaders are sensitive to the needs of beginning teachers.

In addition to the responses similar to the research literature, beginning teachers in the researcher's study also expressed concerns about curricular issues, having a supportive school culture and teacher mentors. These additional concerns will be addressed following the discourse on the research literature responses.

A closer examination of the reasons beginning teachers shared may help give a better understanding of their positions. In the case where three participants addressed the topic of insufficient salaries, two of the three spoke in terms of repayment of their scholarship obligations through educational service rather than repaying in cash. Additionally, both teachers were hopeful that they would be able to lower or remove their scholarships entirely by teaching for the prescribed number of years. One of the scholarship teachers also stated that she would have to re-evaluate her position after three years relative to whether she needed more money. She also expressed frustration about rumors that the state legislature was looking at, and had proposed removing compensation for advanced degrees for new teachers in the upcoming budget. The state legislature subsequently did remove compensation for advanced degrees for new teachers. Insufficient salaries were not a major concern for 65.5 percent of participants in the study.

Scholarship repayment through teaching service may merit examination as the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program has received national recognition as a model that could be replicated. Darling-Hammond (2007) applauds the program as a model that is able to both "simultaneously improve teacher competence and retention and meet pressing supply needs in hard-to-staff urban and rural locations" (p. 3). An evaluation that covered seven years reported that 75 percent of Teaching Fellow recipients remained in teaching. Additionally,

many recipients had assumed leadership roles in schools and districts. Unfortunately, the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program did not receive state funding for the upcoming academic year.

The second most cited reason for leaving by teachers involved concern about lack of support from school administration (Thornton, et al., 2008). While no teachers specifically reported feeling lack of support from administration, two teachers reported not feeling supported by the school in their PLC's. The first concern was related to a beginning teacher whose subject matter PLCs met at another location. This resulted in her not receiving the information and having to search out the information on her own. The second teacher stated that she did not receive any support from the beginning teachers' PLCs (mandated by the county school system) and she was not able to attend her departmental PLC due to a scheduling conflict. Another teacher expressed concern about teacher-run PLCs that barely met and therefore did not have the quality of the other PLC that met regularly. The same participant was interested in having an assistant principal attend the PLCs; however, she understood that it was not possible for the assistant principals to cover all PLCs meetings at all times. Six participants expressed receiving strong support through PLCs and spoke of a monthly beginning teachers' meeting that was designed specifically to help beginning teachers through the challenges novice teachers face, especially during their first years of teaching.

According to the literature, student discipline issues were the next most cited reason for teacher departures. Research shows that conditions involving administrative support involved with student discipline, are vastly different between urban and rural schools.

Teachers in urban school report receiving far less support from administrators and parents and in addition to having to work with inferior materials, may also have greater problems with student behavior (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Metlife, 2005). Research also reports that teachers express concerns about principals being unresponsive (Jalongo & Heider, 2006) as well as failing to provide adequate administrative support to teachers (Brill & McCartney, 2008).

In the current study, one teacher made a recommendation that beginning teachers be given more support for disciplinary action, and more support be given for beginning teachers who need help with classroom management since they were still learning. The teacher also wanted administrators to back beginning teachers up when beginning teachers disciplined students. Three participants reported that classroom management was one of their most challenging areas during their first year of teaching; however, they expressed no concern about the level of administrative support they received. For the current study seven participants did not view student discipline issues as a concern.

The fourth most cited reason for teachers' decision to leave is a lack of teacher influence over decision making. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) determined from a survey that sought to determine reasons for teacher attrition and found that about 39 percent of teachers who left did so to pursue other jobs and 29 percent left due to "dissatisfaction with teaching as a career or with their specific job [as] a main reason" (p. 32). When given an opportunity to more explicitly state their reason for leaving, teachers cited at least one of four working conditions which prompted their decisions to leave and the "lack of teacher influence over school-wide and classroom decision making" (p. 32) was among the four reasons. For the

current study no participants expressed concern about having a part in school-wide or classroom decision making; however, one teacher did recommend that the school could post a school wide list that would help beginning teachers know where and when PLC meetings were being held. One other teacher made a positive remark relative to having input regarding topics that would be discussed in the beginning teachers' PLC earlier in the school year.

All interviewed participants gave input concerning curricular issues that ranged from curriculum presentation, covering state mandated instructional standards, following state designed pacing guides, aligning lesson plans with the curriculum, sharing instructional strategies, and working to ensure that all students have the same learning experience.

Jones (2012) shared his perspective as a new teacher, and made a plea for a workload that was manageable; a mentor with whom he could work, and a school community that was dedicated to good teaching practices. Jones further stated:

The problem is that sometimes I'm too overwhelmed to get excited about my work. I'm too busy with routine tasks to give a few minutes after school to a student who needs help. I'm too burdened with planning my next lesson to reflect on the lesson I just gave. I am too worried about students' test scores to remember that students also need time for creative and critical thinking. I need help. Many new teachers struggle with knowing what to teach, what resources they have to teach it, how to teach, how to engage different kinds of learners, and how to prepare students for high stakes tests. (p. 74)

Wynn et al. (2007) discussed the importance of curricular support for novice teachers, and determined that:

Various types of support in the first year have been found to be associated with reduced turnover, including ‘having a mentor from the same field, having common planning time with other teachers in the same subject, having regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, and being part of an external network of teachers’.

(p. 213)

As stated by Goodwin (2012), in addition to having classroom management and unsupportive environments problems, beginning teachers are also burdened by curricular freedom. Goodwin (2012) further stated that “by effectively addressing these areas, schools can help new teachers improve their skills more quickly, thereby keeping them in the profession and raising student achievement” (p. 84).

The second theme that emerged from participants in the current study is one of having a supportive school culture. All eight participants felt that they were supported school wide and felt welcomed to seek assistance from all faculty and staff members. Hudson (2012), while responding to the question “how can schools support beginning teachers”, suggests that “establishing a professional learning community (PLC) that supports the beginning teacher may comprise of a range of staff, not only teaching staff, who can assist the beginning teacher through purposeful guidance to ensure effective assimilation into a teaching career” (p. 72). Additionally, novice teachers have other concerns that may cause distress “such as understanding the school culture and infrastructure, learning how to be an effective teacher and working productively with the wider school community” (Hudson, 2012, p. 72).

Hughes (2012), while examining organizational and school characteristics, found school climate to be the “strongest indicator” that impacted teacher retention and was followed by “personal characteristics, teacher preparation and teacher efficacy” (p. 247).

Administrative support is also an important factor that can affect teacher retention since teachers have a desire to be in school with strong supportive administrators who clearly articulate expectations (Hughes, 2012, p. 247). In addition to having a trusting relationship in the work environment where beginning teachers are supported and valued, leaders should also try to promote a school environment that is both friendly and respectful to assist beginning teachers become successful as they move from novice to more experienced teachers (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010).

The third and final major theme that emerged from the current study addressed teacher mentors. By far all participants responded with excitement as they spoke about their mentors and the added value mentors brought to their teaching experience. Beginning teachers’ responses to question #2 were answered with excitement, even though the question did not ask about mentors specifically. The question asked participants to “Describe how your school responded to your challenges as a new teacher” and seven out of eight participants named their mentor as the school’s main response to their first year challenges. The one participant who did not mention the term “mentor” spoke of having a supportive department and a supportive hallway, as well as people out of her department who also offered support. The lone participant also responded positively about her mentor on question #10 that specifically asked, “What extent has mentoring or coaching been a part of your experience as a new teacher?” The researcher believes all participants perceived their

mentors to be a positive factor in response to the overwhelming challenges they faced as beginning teachers.

While the literature is replete with research on mentoring as part of an induction, for this study Hudson (2012) summed it all up by stating “through quality mentoring, beginning teachers can develop a repertoire of problem-solving strategies for dealing with the practicalities and complexities associated with contextual school and teaching situations” (p. 72). Hudson further states that beginning teachers should receive guidance that supports strategies of resilience towards counteracting rates of attrition. Additionally, programs that support retention rates need not only to work towards developing perceptions that are positive, but should also work to increase the confidence of new teachers regarding working and teaching in new teaching environments (Hudson, 2012, p. 72).

Darling-Hammond (2010) discusses districts that have managed to lower attrition rates through mentoring programs and stated that:

Districts like Cincinnati, Columbus, and Toledo, Ohio and Rochester, New York, have reduced attrition rates of beginning teachers by more than two-thirds (often from levels exceeding 30% to rates of under 5%) by providing expert mentors with release time to coach beginners in their first year on the job. These young teachers not only stay in the profession at higher rates but also become competent more quickly than those who must learn by trial and error. (p. 24)

While conducting research on beginning teacher induction, Ingersoll (2012) determined that a link exists between teacher retention and induction programs and further

concluded that the strength relative to the effect was dependent on the number and types of support received by beginning teachers. Ingersoll further stated:

Participation in some types of activities in the first year was more effective at reducing turnover than participation in other types. The factors with the strongest effect were having a mentor teacher from one's subject area and having common planning or collaboration time with other teachers in one's subject area. (p. 50)

In an effort to give greater specificity to the research, Ingersoll gives percentages of the effectiveness of the different support factors and ranks them in order of effectiveness and presents the findings as follows:

- Face time with administrator 87%
- Mentor 81%
- Beginner's seminars 71%
- Collaboration with colleagues 58%
- Teacher Aide 31%
- Reduced course load 17% (p. 50)

Beginning teacher participants, through their involvement with PLCs, are recipients of several of the support factors that are inherent in PLCs. By design supportive factors are embedded in the culture of the school and are accepted school wide as the way things are done around here. Clearly the teacher mentor program is a winner for current participants and also ranks number two on Ingersoll's (2010) list of effective supportive strategies.

From the study conducted by the researcher, participants' concerns were somewhat different from concerns found in the prior literature review. Concerns about low salaries, lack

of support from administrators, student discipline problems, and lack of teachers having influence over decision making were not completely consistent with concerns of current participants. Participants in the current study were concerned about curricular issues, a supportive school culture, and teacher mentors. A common thread that connects both sets of concerns is the fact that concerns from both studies fell under organizational factors which are both components of teacher working conditions.

Of particular interest is the overwhelming concern over curricular issues that appeared to be the most pressing concern with participants in the current study. Could it be that accountability through high stake testing and a PLC driven philosophical shift that moves the focus from ‘what teachers taught’ to ‘what students learned’ may be causing a greater need for clarity in curriculum presentation? Additionally, Common Core accountability may also play a role in a high demand for curricular based issues. Based on responses given by participants, beginning teachers are receiving assistance in curricular concerns through PLCs that are also subject-matter specific and through their mentor relationships.

A supportive school culture is also addressed through PLCs, and includes school-wide involvement which makes everyone in the school responsible for ensuring that all students have a good learning experience. Overall, participants perceived that they were being supported, save two participants who did not feel totally supported regarding PLCs. It should be noted that one of the two participants reported that after the beginning teacher attended the subject matter PLC she felt that there was great support; the issue was not

knowing where and when the PLC was taking place. Once that problem was resolved it was not longer an issue for the participant.

As reported by participants, the teacher mentor program was exceptionally supportive and was well received and greatly needed by all beginning teachers. It was apparent that teacher mentors were involved in almost all facets of the beginning teachers' first year experiences. This included one-on-one meetings, the beginning teachers' PLC meeting and the subject matter PLCs. Based on interviews, the mentors seemed totally committed to ensuring that beginning teachers had the best support available to help them through their first and very often most difficult year of teaching.

With respect to research question 1) What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of Professional Learning Communities, the majority of participants, or seven out of eight had a favorable impression of PLCs, and the beginning teacher who had concerns about not receiving support from PLCs did have positive comments about one of the PLCs that she attended. One of the beginning teachers who felt unsupported by PLCs also spoke positively about being able to work together in a PLC with other teachers, and how feelings of stress and feeling alone were calmed, as she and the other members of the PLC worked together to create assessments.

Research question: 1A) What are the perceptions of beginning teachers of mentoring in Professional Learning Communities? Eight out of eight participants responded positively about their perceptions of teacher mentors whose services were facilitated through Professional Learning Communities.

Research question 2) How are beginning teachers' decisions to move or leave influenced by their perceptions of Professional Learning Communities? Six out of eight participants had favorable responses; one participant believed the question was not applicable to him since he never considered leaving. One respondent, while giving favorable responses to PLCs, shared that she was not sure that PLCs could make her want to stay for a long time due to limited opportunities and pay freezes. Also, concerns about the possibility of a legislative decision that would remove financial compensation for advanced degrees was a serious point of contention for this respondent. Overall, responses from participants gave evidence that the school-wide PLC environment had a positive influence on their decision to remain in teaching.

Having been in education for almost 20 years, the results of this study have given me reason for pause. As budget restraints impact schools and cause schools to run leaner year after year, educational leaders must re-evaluate how instruction is being delivered, and whether it is being delivered effectively. Additionally they must determine how children are performing on high stake testing, and whether they are learning skills that will take them to a place that we will never see. As public schools continue to lose funds, and private and charter schools gain funds, educational leaders in the public arena would do well to examine where this path will lead them, and how they will play the hand they are dealt. Educators in public education must take the bull by its horns to ensure that our most prized possession, our children, will receive an education that is rooted in excellence. Since funding is not available, and may not be for several years, leaders will have to use what resources they have to delivery meaningful instruction to students.

The inability to retain novice teachers until they become proficient in their craft poses a major threat to our democracy and society on many levels. As veteran teachers retire and are replaced with novice teachers, students will most likely experience a bump in their learning. However, if new teachers continue to leave at their present rates, and never achieve veteran status, the bumps will become more frequent and probably more severe. Students must have qualified teachers in classroom to have a good learning experience.

Noble High appears to have mastered its PLCs program that includes a wrap-a-round mentor support component. Beginning teachers appeared confident, and ready to stay with teaching. They appeared to have confidence and assurance that they could teach. They were professional and seemed determined to become the best teachers they were capable of becoming. Support for the novice teachers seemed to be defined by specific actions and total mentor involvement during their first few years of teaching. Teacher mentors were supportive when they attended beginning teachers PLCs, and subject matter PLCs, in addition to the mandatory weekly meeting with their mentee. Support was visible when mentors were available before and after school, and when they checked on their mentee during the week, even when it wasn't required. Support took on a personality in the form of teacher mentors, who undoubtedly let novice teachers know that they had value, and that success was the only option unless they chose otherwise. It is also necessary that teachers are willing to work through the challenges that first year teaching brings. The researcher is not suggesting that it will be easy, but with the right kind of support, novice teachers can navigate through their first years with grace, dignity, and success.

The researcher also believes that a PLC/mentor model is not only able to offer support that will make a difference to novice teachers, but may also offer solutions to a problem that is so badly in need of repair.

Conclusion

Beginning teacher retention is a problem that seems to be stubborn and persistent and has become a cause for concern for educators in most sectors of American schools. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2010), due to the high number of retirees in the past few years, researchers anticipate having "a need to hire between 2.9 and 5.1 million full-time teachers between 2008 and 2020" (p. 9). The problems continue to arise, because those who enter teaching leave in significant numbers before they become proficient in their craft, with up to 50 percent leaving by their fifth year. (Corbell et al., 2010). The financial cost associated with teachers leaving is astronomical and puts a financial burden on taxpayers, state and local governments, and school districts. The problem is presently being exacerbated by baby boomer retirements which will leave a gaping hole in the profession if the retention rate of beginning teachers is not improved.

Recommendations for Practice

This study was conducted in one high school in the southeastern part of North Carolina and represented a small sample of beginning teachers who had been involved with Professional Learning Communities for a period of one or two years.

Teacher retention is a problem that has been and continues to present challenges to educational leaders. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) remind us that teacher attrition rates continue to "follow a U-shaped curve, with the highest attrition rate early and late in

teachers' careers" (p. 1029). Little can be done to effect retirement numbers, however efforts can be made to seek solutions that help retain beginning teachers early in their careers. This study as well as current literature determined that novice teachers need support (Corbell et al., 2010) if they are to be successful and remain in teaching. One such strategy that may merit examination is the Professional Learning Community

In this study most beginning teachers perceived Professional Learning Communities as a strategy that provided much needed support during their most challenging year as novice teachers. Support for beginning teachers is important since feeling supported may encourage them to hang on through the difficult transitional period while they move from novice to experienced teachers; and this in turn may lead to reduced attrition and greater retention rates.

The Professional Learning Community curricular sessions appear to support curricular concerns for novice teachers. In the current study the researcher found that beginning teachers expressed needs in the area of curriculum presentation. Grossman and Thompson (2008) determined that novice teachers spend much of their time searching for materials relative to their respective disciplines. Effective subject matter Professional Learning Community meetings were also helpful to beginning teachers who needed help with curriculum presentation and other curricular related issues.

In addition to the benefits afforded by Professional Learning Communities, teacher mentors were also perceived to be powerful in helping novice teachers cope with challenges they face as new teachers. Beginning teachers remain in need of mentoring that usually comes from administrators and veteran teachers. This support continues to be needed until

novice teachers acquire skills that will allow them to become more independent in their craft (Matsumura, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, & Bickel, 2010). Since this strategy has been effective for this small sample of beginning teachers, and is supported by research, it is recommended that teacher mentors are trained and assigned to beginning teachers at all school levels as soon as possible. School leaders (principals and teachers) must devote a great deal of time to mentoring new teachers in order to ensure that they attain at least a minimum level of competency (Matsumura et al., 2010). A teacher mentor program can operate independently of Professional Learning Communities and may help beginning teachers face challenges more effectively during their early years of teaching.

It is recommended that a PLC program is implemented that calls for all employees to be responsible for student learning, that includes administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers and all other faculty and staff members. A PLC is recommended to be in an environment that ensures support for new teachers through wrap-around mentor services and a supportive staff. A PLC is recommended where collaboration is part of the norm and subject PLCs and beginning teachers' PLCs are a normal part of the day. A PLC is recommended that exists in a setting where shared leadership is operational, and where teachers have a venue to present their ideas and articulate their concerns. Also a setting where parents, business partners and students are granted an opportunity to become part of the school community, and to share in areas that will help improve the school. Finally, a PLC in an organization that makes data driven decisions, and uses research to help guide its decisions, while remaining a learning community. To ensure success, a PLC of this magnitude needs members who are willing to work together, while having good mission,

vision, value and goal statements that will serve as a guide for all members of the community.

It is recommended that this PLC/mentor model program that most novice teachers perceive to be successful be shared with schools as a best practice.

It is also recommended that mentor strategies that have been successfully implemented be shared with other schools.

While it is beyond the scope of this study, it is recommended that novice teachers are assigned permanent classrooms, since rotating from classroom to classroom creates a logistic hardship for new teachers.

It is also recommended that principals at all school levels work to encourage a supportive school culture (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010) where all members of the faculty and staff are responsible for student and organizational success. While changing a culture is no easy undertaking, it is critically important to have a school culture that is welcoming to all and especially to beginning teachers. As novice teachers strive to find their way during this challenging period, being able to solicit help from all faculty or staff members may help to lighten their loads, and thus offer encouragement to beginning teachers.

Implications for Research

This study adds to the body of literature as it relates to beginning teacher retention rates and Professional Learning Communities. It is relevant and important to the profession due to the loss of beginning teachers from the profession and an urgent need to maintain teachers in classrooms.

It is recommended that further research be conducted to determine whether the PLC/mentor model examined in this study should be expanded to all schools.

It is recommended that schools and districts use data gleaned from beginning teachers that address challenges faced by novice teachers during their first few years in the profession, and to further determine the extent that first year challenges play relative to beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave the profession altogether. Data gathered directly from novice teachers, along with data from current literature and school data teams may prove beneficial to leaders when making decisions (Fusarelli, 2008) and developing policies and procedures that address teacher retention and attrition.

It is also recommended that further research be conducted at all high schools where Professional Learning Communities are operational in order to determine beginning teachers' perceptions of Professional Learning Communities, and to determine how beginning teachers' perceptions are influenced relative to moving, leaving or staying in the profession. As a researcher, keep in mind that you may face obstacles when trying to access districts, schools and employees while attempting to gain permission to conduct a study.

Finally, it is recommended that districts initiate and support Professional Learning Community Programs along with mentoring programs that help to support beginning teachers during their early years of teaching. Districts can develop new strategies that can possibly reduce the initial work-load that is required of beginning teachers and thus allow a transitional period where novice teachers are not overwhelmed in their new profession by virtually having the same level of responsibility as their veteran colleagues.

Summary of Chapter V

This final chapter of this research presented a discussion on the major findings from a study that examined the perceptions of beginning high school teachers and looked further at how beginning teachers' decisions to move, stay, or leave were influenced by their involvement with Professional Learning Communities. Teachers' present perceptions were contrasted with previous research literature, and current research literature was discussed as it related to findings from the researcher's study. Recommendations for practice and future research implications were also provided.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to go into teaching?
2. What motivates you to remain in teaching?
3. As a beginning teacher, what areas of your job were most challenging during your first year of teaching?
4. What areas of your job were most rewarding during your first year of teaching?
5. Describe how your school responded to your first year challenges as a new teacher?
6. What professional development opportunities were available to you as a new teacher?
7. As a beginning teacher, what have PLCs done to assist you in your day-to-day teaching experiences?
8. In what ways have students been affected by your school's PLC?
9. What is your impression of how your school supports beginning teachers through PLCs?
10. To what extent has mentoring or coaching been a part of your experience as a new teacher?
11. Describe any characteristics of PLCs you would consider to be ineffective relative to supporting beginning teachers.
12. Have you at any point considered leaving the teaching profession, if so, why?
13. What characteristics of PLCs, if any, supported or influenced your decision to stay?
14. As a more experienced beginning teacher, if given an opportunity to improve PLCs for beginning teachers, what kind of recommendations would you make?

15. What other suggestions for retaining beginning teachers would you have pertaining to PLCs or not?

Appendix B**Interview Observation Protocol - Field Notes Log**

Observer's name:

Date:

Time:

Place:

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes	Observations/Comments

Appendix C

Teachers' Years of Experience and Turnover Rates

Southeastern County District Schools
Haven, North Carolina

Teachers' Years of Experience					
Years	Entity	03-Years	4-10 Year	10+ Years	Turnover Rate
2009/10	Noble HS	12%	22%	66%	10%
	District	17%	32%	51%	12%
	State	19%	28%	54%	13%
2010/11	Noble HS	07%	25%	68%	04%
	District	17%	31%	51%	12%
	State	18%	28%	54%	13%
2011/12	Noble HS	12%	22%	66%	10%
	District	17%	31%	52%	12%
	State	18%	28%	55%	14%

Chart shows years of teacher experience broken down by years and the percentage of teachers in those categories, and the total turnover percentage for all teachers for the specific academic years.