

ABSTRACT

MITCHELL, TEKEISHA FORD. An Exploration of Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Professional Learning Communities on their Professional Practices and on Teacher Retention. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli.)

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the influence of professional learning communities on teachers' professional practices. Research shows that the adjustment from college student to the teaching environment for new teachers has increased through involvement on committees, collaboration with peers, and hands-on planning in the decisions that affect the total school environment. It also shows the need for continued staff monitoring and reflections on best practices for career teachers. Numerous studies examine the role of various models and theories in the development of professional learning communities. Models and theories on professional learning communities are mainly used to determine effective ways to work with adult learners in the school environment. This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of the influence of PLCs on their professional practices. Interview data collected from teachers participating in the PLC process was analyzed to determine if there is a relationship between the PLC process and their professional practices. Teachers with various years of experience were asked their views on professional learning communities. The results were analyzed to see what impact, if any, teachers perceive professional learning communities have on their professional practices. The overall findings were teachers at both schools felt that proper implementation was lacking and that personal planning time suffered do to time spent at professional learning community meetings. For this reason, most teachers did not feel that professional learning communities

had a completely positive effect on their professional practices. Results indicated overall teachers do not believe that professional learning communities affect teacher retention.

While professional learning communities in this study did not have the most positive effect on teachers' professional practices and retention, the researcher included key points considered to be beneficial for administrators that were implemented the following year after completing the study. There are four major areas the researcher deemed important; understanding of professional learning communities, implementation, structure, and teachers' perception of what they need in professional learning communities.

All leaders need to make sure that they understand the professional learning community process in order to lead the school and monitor the success of each team. A detailed plan for implementation that takes place early in the school year is also recommended. Key structures need to be put in place such as norms, roles of committee members, and teacher developed agendas. Last administrators need to ask teachers what they need for their professional learning community to function. For administrators or school districts implementing professional learning communities, the result of this research reveals the importance of embracing teachers' perceptions while staying focused on the "main thing", student achievement.

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An Exploration of Teachers' Perception of the Influence of Professional Learning
Communities on Their Professional Practices and on Teacher Retention

by
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DEDICATION

For my mother...

Deaconate Peggy Ford-Wilson- a 1978 graduate of Elizabeth City State University went on to pursue her lifelong dream of being a teacher. I would often ask my mother if there was anything else she wanted to do in life and she would always answer, “No I always wanted to be a teacher.” And teaching is what she did; Sunday school, bible study, public school, and anywhere she found a pupil.

My mother was employed with the Hertford County Public School System for nineteen years. She loved teaching and working with her students. She was always concerned about the students, placing their needs before her own. Many days after chemotherapy, she would find the energy to go to work and teach a full day. For this reason, her colleagues voted her teacher of the year in 2004.

A few weeks before her passing, one of her students called to thank her for all she did to help him achieve his goal in life. My mom had taught him in eighth grade and now he was submitting his final paper for his doctoral degree at NYU. Even at her weakest point, she did not take the credit but said, “To God be the glory.”

She tried to use her life experiences as teachable moments for her children, nieces, nephews and other youngsters. She encouraged us to do our best and to set goals in life. She would always say to “put God first because only what you do for Christ will last.” So to you, Mom, I dedicate this dissertation for all of your love and support, your baby girl Keisha.

BIOGRAPHY

Tekeisha Ford Mitchell was born in Ahoskie, North Carolina. She grew up in Winton, North Carolina under the loving care of her mother Peggy Ford-Wilson and step-father Charles Wilson along with her younger brother McCoy and a host of aunts, uncles, and her grandparents.

Tekeisha graduated from Hertford County High School in 1991 and attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She graduated in 1995 with a B.A. in speech communication. After graduating she was hired as a teacher assistant in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools where she found her passion, teaching. In 1996 she was hired as a first grade teacher in the Vance County School System. She continued her education at North Carolina Central University where she earned a B.A. in elementary education. In 2002 she earned a Masters of School Administration from North Carolina State University.

Tekeisha taught kindergarten and first grade for five years in Vance County. She was also a SLN teacher for the federal prison in Butner, North Carolina through Vance-Granville Community College. In 2001, she was hired as a kindergarten teacher for Durham Public Schools. The next year in 2002, she was hired as an assistant principal for Durham Public Schools. In 2003, Tekeisha began her doctoral studies in Educational Leadership and Supervision at North Carolina State University. In 2006 she was hired as a principal in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. She returned to Durham Public Schools as a principal in 2007 where she currently serves as principal of an elementary school.

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I would like to thank God who makes all things possible and gave me strength to complete this journey. I pray that I can honor Him in the lives I touch and in all that I do to serve Him. I would like to thank my family for their prayers and encouraging words that kept me on my path. I also would like to thank my husband Darrin Mitchell for always telling me that I could do it. I want to thank my son Ian who made me do it. To my colleagues and friends, I thank you for providing support when I felt like giving up. Furthermore, I extend my gratitude to my chair Dr. Lance Fusarelli and the committee members for their guidance and advice. Above all, I want to thank my mom Peggy Ford-Wilson for being the strong, dedicated educator who overcame diversity, obstacles, and struggles and made teaching her passion.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

A successful face-to-face team is more than just collectively intelligent. It makes everyone work harder, think smarter and reach better conclusions than they would have on their own.

-James Surowiecki

Introduction

With the increasing demands placed on teachers, it has become imperative that we not only recruit highly qualified teachers, but we find ways to retain teachers in the field of education. Many school systems have turned to professional learning communities to accomplish this goal. This study will examine the influence of professional learning communities as a reform to accomplish this goal (among other goals of PLCs, such as improving their professional practice). The study will examine the possible influence of professional learning communities (PLCs) on teacher practices in education. The study is a perceptual study of teachers' perceptions of the impact professional learning communities on their professional practice, including whether it improves teacher retention. The study seeks to explore the following questions: (1) In what ways, if any, are teachers' professional practices affected by working in professional learning communities? and (2) Are teachers working in professional learning communities more likely to remain in the field of education?

The first chapter of this study presents background information on this issue, states the purpose of the study, its justification, problem statement, significance, and rationale. The

chapter concludes with a definition of key terms and clearly identifies the assumptions and limitations of the study.

Professional learning communities are believed to be necessary to sustain improvement in teacher practices. Research on professional learning communities has been conducted throughout the United States and Canada (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Eaker, DuFour, & Eaker, 2002). According to Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002), “A school cannot function as a professional learning community until its staff has grappled with the questions that provide direction both for the school as an organization and individuals with it” (p. 3). This research study will examine teacher practices as a result of the implementation of a professional learning community model: specifically, the perceptions of teachers who have participated in professional learning communities.

Background

It is estimated that 40-50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Weiss, 1999). According to data provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2010), “The 115 school systems reported that 11,012 teachers of the 99,241 teachers employed during the 2009-2010 school year left their systems for a system level turnover rate of 11.10%” (p. 1).

Nationally, numerous studies find that as many as 50% of new teachers leave within the first five years of entry into the profession (Hafner & Owings, 1991; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991), and that approximately 33% of new teachers leave within the first three years (Ingersoll, 2003). North

Carolina's new teacher turnover rates for the first three years of teaching are slightly higher than the national average (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007; Reiman, Corbell, & Thomas, 2007). This failure rate would not be acceptable for students in any classroom and therefore should not be acceptable for new teachers (Weiss, 1999). For this reason, among others, professional learning communities have been created to increase the confidence and effectiveness of all teachers.

Minimal research has been done to capture teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities and the impact teachers feel professional learning communities have on capacity building, school efficiency, student achievement, and teacher retention. Numerous studies over the past two decades have researched various programs on learning communities, but not teachers' perceptions of PLCs. For this reason, the proposed study will contribute to the knowledge base in the field of education by addressing teachers' perceptions of PLCs, particularly with respect to their impact, if any, on teacher retention.

District Efforts to Recruit and Retain Teachers

Several trends are occurring throughout education as school districts struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. In Hertford County, North Carolina, the school district has built affordable housing for teachers. In this rural community, teachers can live in a community that was designed for them at a lower cost than renting from other developers in the county. Not only is the housing affordable, but also teachers can room with other teachers, forming professional and personal bonds. Other school systems have worked with county governments and banks to create lower interest rates for home loans for teachers. The

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is contributing to community revitalization by creating the Good Neighbor Next Door Program. Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade teachers are offered incentives of 50% of the list price of the home in return for a 36-month commitment to live on the property. A second mortgage note is then made for the other 50%, which does not require payment until the end of the three-year commitment.

In Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools' Teacher Housing Resource Center (THRC) advertises affordable housing prices for teachers, offers foreclosure prevention workshops, and a borrower outreach day calendar. The website for the program provides a step-by step process for meeting teachers' needs for owning their own homes and keeping them through tough economic times (<http://teacherhousing.cps.k12.il.us/>).

Several school systems have created incentive cards to recruit and retain teachers. By providing discounts to local businesses, teachers can save on everyday purchases as well as larger, more expensive purchases within the county. Discounts range from a lower price for services to a percentage off the total purchase price. Items range from oil changes to dinners at restaurants. These discounts are only given to teachers who work in that system. Some systems stretch a little farther and offer supplements for teachers. The supplements range from 12% divided into two payments given at the middle of the year and at the end of the year, to flat rate supplements, and supplements that increase with years of employment with the district. Bonuses are also given to teachers who work in areas that are more challenging to fill such as in science and math.

Mentoring programs have also been used by school districts to recruit and retain teachers. Projects such as the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP), which began in 1993, reported that 90% of participating teachers have remained in the profession. In urban districts, teachers who participated in formal induction programs for beginning teachers reported a 93% retention rate (Weiss, 1999). These programs range from novice teachers receiving three consecutive years of mentoring to mentoring groups lead by a veteran teacher for one year. Often these programs deal with new teachers coming together and venting on the concerns they have in their classroom, whereas professional learning communities are for teachers of all stages in their careers working to come up with solutions to improve student achievement. However, aside from mentoring programs, which are uneven from district to district and even within districts, often novice or untenured teachers are provided little assistance with teaching as a practice and as a craft. This system leaves teachers struggling with becoming professionals in their field and trying to manage day-to-day issues. See Appendix B for national data on teacher turnover.

Factors that Affect Teachers' Professional Practices

Three background factors that affect teachers' professional practices are isolation in the classroom, lack of support in increasing knowledge base skills, and opportunities to work in better paying jobs during stressful economic times in a less demanding environment. Although teaching requires interaction with youth, teacher education programs are mostly taught in isolation away from colleagues and schools. Though this isolation exists, new teachers are held to the same expectations and standards as veteran teachers. This leaves

many new teachers to sink or swim. The transition from student teaching to the real world of a classroom of their own often frustrates and overwhelms beginning teachers.

Recent research documents that the teacher shortage is not solely attributed to the results of fewer teachers being trained as it is to the “revolving door” of teachers leaving before retirement (Ingersoll, 2001). Teaching is a hands-on profession. Meeting the demands of the classroom from classroom management, testing, assessment, and communicating with students and parents can make or break new teachers. New teachers find themselves alone in a classroom with no time to discuss or bounce ideas off other teachers. However, professional learning communities are a reform that provides structured opportunities for reflection and evaluation of performance (Rowley, 1999). McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) suggest that collaborative inquiry allows teachers to share knowledge from experience. Such sharing may lead to increased teacher competence, less stress and isolation, and may positively impact teacher retention. In 1996 Darling-Hammond observed that curriculum reform and the transformation of teacher roles, as a result of collaboration between teachers, improves teacher morale.

By focusing collaboration on the right things, teachers can improve a school. Collaboration becomes meaningful when it is beneficial for all parties involved and their students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Professional learning communities can link teachers across school districts, the state, or the world. Alleviating the isolation of lone curricular programs such as the Chinese language program or various honors or advanced classes that may only have one teacher at a school in that subject allows all teachers

regardless of what they teach the opportunity to participate in a nurturing learning community.

New teachers often lack support in learning the skills needed to be successful in classroom management, content teaching, and classroom organization. These occupational skills are addressed in teacher induction programs that are designed to provide in-service training versus pre-service training received prior to teaching through clinical training such as student teaching. Through in-service training, novice teachers work with veteran teachers. Many school leaders believe investing in training that is ongoing for new teachers will support teacher retention (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Successful induction programs go a long way toward improving the quality of teaching and improving student achievement (Breux & Wong, 2003). During the first years of teaching, teachers should be learning their profession, finding fewer demands on their time, and provided on-the-job support. Professional learning communities can provide teachers with guidance and support to ease this feeling of isolation. Professional learning communities get new teachers involved in the total school environment (Breux & Wong, 2003). Rosenholtz (1989) brought workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, teacher support, and teacher learning. In the eighties, he suggested that when teachers have a network of colleagues to rely upon, cooperation among colleagues, expanded professional roles, and teacher efficacy increased (Rosenholtz, 1989). Teachers with a high sense of efficacy were more likely to adapt and to stay in the profession. They were also more likely to come up with and implement plans that would improve student achievement.

Even though many communities are facing economic struggles, many teachers are looking for jobs that pay more. Many novice teachers are not faced with supporting families, mortgage payments, or other responsibilities that may tie them to a profession with which they may not be content and are willing to take the risk of finding another profession in the business world or going back to school to change careers. Ingersoll (2001) affirmed that teacher turnover may be associated with the traits of the individual teacher. Some of these traits are gender, age, education, and specialty field.

Novice teachers who are right out of college and veteran teachers nearing retirement tend to leave their job at higher rates than others (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Cochran-Smith and Zeichner also reported males leave the field of education faster than females and noted that teachers who leave have higher levels of degrees and training than those who remain. Furthermore, the increasing demands of high-stakes testing accountability and the pressure to make Adequate Yearly Progress and state ABC standards may encourage many teachers to find less stressful, more rewarding jobs outside the profession.

Many studies have linked student achievement to teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek, 1971). Through professional learning communities, teachers should take ownership of all students by sharing best practices and working collaboratively to improve student learning.

Problem Statement

The traditional school often functions as a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot.

-Robert Eaker

For many years teachers have been viewed as trained professionals who work in isolation from their peers. Through this isolation, it is assumed that teachers will routinely engage in best practices for students (Eaker, 2002). Current research on the retention of new teachers shows that new teachers are leaving the field of education nationally at a rate of 30% after three years and 50% after five years (Meyers, 2006). Reasons for leaving the field of education vary, but among the reasons are disappointment with student achievement and lack of self-efficacy. By looking at teacher attitudes toward the PLC process, research will show if this process influences teacher practices (See Appendix C for select data drawn from the 2010 Teacher Working Conditions Survey).

In previous research, teacher retention has been monitored by peer teacher leaders or through mentoring programs. With this type of program, teachers rely on one teacher for guidance and direction. The lead teacher is often a veteran teacher who works in collaboration with the new teacher. Meeting times are often not consistent and are from one perspective. This system of monitoring does not foster team collaboration and is not action oriented. While mentoring programs can be beneficial, they rarely are comprehensive or systemic and often fail to provide enough assistance to new teachers.

Purpose of the Study

How can anyone be sure that a particular set of new inputs will produce better outputs if we don't at least study what happens inside?

-Paul Black and Dylan William

The purpose of this study is to determine whether professional learning communities promote teacher retention and affect teachers' professional practice. This study is designed to identify how teachers feel about teacher practices when working in professional learning communities, and to determine whether they feel professional learning communities impact their commitment to stay in the profession. Through this research, teachers will evaluate the work and time they have put into professional learning communities and determine whether or not they feel the time spent has improved their work lives and job satisfaction. Two research questions will be addressed in this study: (1) In what ways, if any, are teachers' professional practices affected by working in professional learning communities? and (2) Are teachers working in professional learning communities more likely to remain in the field of education?

Justification of the Study

In *Learning by Doing; A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Rebecca DuFour, Richard DuFour, and Robert Eaker (2006), ensuring that all students learn is the core mission of professional learning communities. This is a shift from traditional educational practices, which focused on teachers teaching and not on students learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). By focusing on student achievement, teachers may

feel a sense of greater self-worth and find value in their work. These feelings foster greater job commitment and dedication and thus may improve teacher retention.

It is expected that professionals engage with colleagues to explore questions that guide the work of professional learning communities. These questions are:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will you respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will you respond when a student already knows?

(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006)

Professional learning communities are distinct from traditional schools in how they address the above questions. Through these questions teachers become aware of their commitment to ensure all students learn. When working in professional learning communities, the plan is not optional but a directive to improve student achievement through systematic, timely, and direct intervention (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When teachers support each other, they are able to make better judgments and are more successful in their careers. When teachers feel successful, they are more likely to remain in the field of education.

Though much of today's research indicates that working collaboratively produces a collective purpose of achieved learning for all students, many teachers still work in isolation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In order for teachers to achieve a collective purpose, teachers must work in a culture of collaboration. Collaboration can be defined as a "systematic process in

which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practices in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3).

For many years teachers have been judged as effective by the teaching methods they use in their classrooms. Professional learning communities take the focus from teacher inputs to student results. Teachers must look at how they can improve student achievement by working as a team and using data to drive instruction (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2006). This practice replaces the work experience of toiling away in isolated classrooms with a more collaborative work environment.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it will contribute to the research on the PLC process in relationship to teacher retention and teachers’ professional practices. At present, little research has explored possible linkages between PLCs and these practices. In fact, most of the existing research on PLCs focuses upon how they operate, with many studies implying that teacher collaboration improves student achievement. The study identifies key components of the PLC process that may increase teacher commitment to remaining in the profession. The results from the teachers’ responses will be analyzed to find possible connections between professional learning communities, teacher retention, and teachers’ professional practices.

Professional learning communities are a popular education reform in North Carolina and have been used at the High Five Conference. During these conferences administrators,

teachers, and central office staff have met to learn and implement professional learning communities throughout five central piedmont counties: Orange, Chapel Hill, Durham, Johnston, and Wake. This study also looks at the real-life application and setting and the day-to-day impact professional learning communities have, if any, on teacher retention. To date, research has not explored the possible connection or link between PLCs and teacher retention. Accordingly, the thoughts and perceptions of teachers about PLCs are an important avenue of inquiry with significant implications for policy and administrative practice.

This study is intended to increase our knowledge of the PLC process. In particular, the study will explore the way participants perceive professional learning communities. The researcher will focus on novice and veteran teachers as they go through the implementation of professional learning communities.

Logic Model of the Study

The study is predicated on the following assumptions which, taken together, form the logic model upon which the study is based. First, an increase in job satisfaction for new and career teachers increases teacher retention. By feeling assured in their job performance, teachers will gain confidence and be affirmed in their decision to become a teacher. PLCs can help in lowering stress levels, anxiety, and frustration for beginning teachers by providing learning communities that give new teachers support and advice. PLCs will also challenge career teachers to consistently use best practices and not become complacent in teaching.

Second, participation in the PLC process allows teachers to develop programs to meet the needs of the students they serve, thus allowing schools to function more efficiently. Teachers become program starters, implementers, and overseers. Teachers collect and disaggregate data to drive instruction and improve student achievement.

Third, by working together teachers learn to master the curriculum and best practices at a more expedient rate. The level of rigor and relevance is also increased by teachers being able to ask higher level thinking questions that are directly related to the content level. Veteran teachers are able to learn new practices from teachers who are recent graduates. Novice and new teachers who tend to rely on trial and error can benefit from the experience of veteran teachers, thus making them proficient at a faster rate. As a result, involvement in professional learning communities should impact teachers' professional practices. This, in turn, should improve teacher job satisfaction for teachers working in PLCs and should improve teacher retention. Organization of the theory is visualized in figure 1.1.

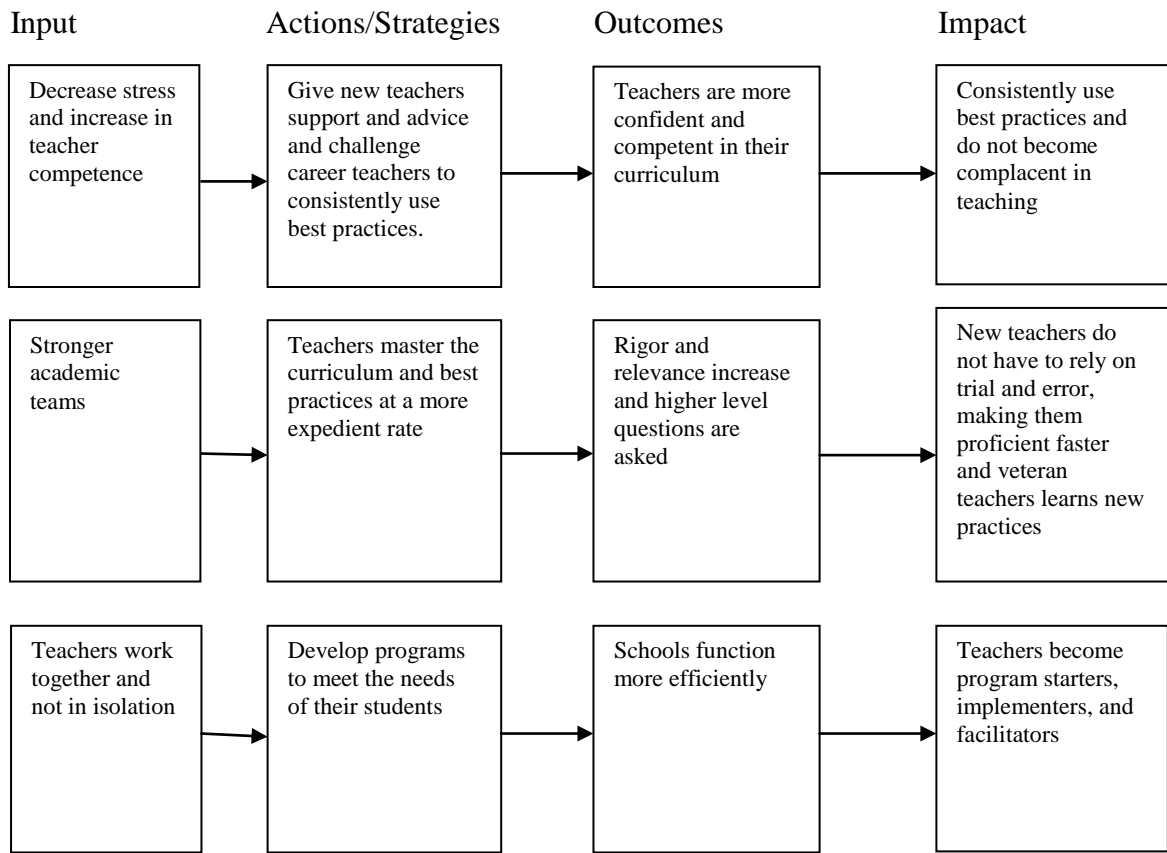


Figure 1.1 Logic Model Theory

Definition of Terms

Action orientation: To move quickly to learning by doing, by turning action and vision into reality. Engagement and reflective practice are viewed as most effective in enhancing teacher efficacy (DuFour, 2006).

Attainable goals: Goals perceived as achievable by those who set them. Attainable goals are intended to document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins (DuFour, 2006).

Assessments: Tests used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning (DuFour, 2006). To make certain that all students are learning these essential skills, assessments are used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning (DuFour, 2006). These tests are generally given by teachers in the form of common or formative assessments.

Building shared knowledge: Learning together by solving problems; being equally a part of the learning process by making sure everyone is clear about the question and has access to the same information and knowledge base (DuFour, 2006).

Collaboration: Professionals working together to achieve a collective purpose for learning for all. Each member is mutually accountable (DuFour, 2006). In the era of No Child Left Behind, professional learning communities have been composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all (DuFour, 2006).

Collective Inquiry: Collaborative teams engage in collective inquiry into best practices with a knowledge and understanding of current practices and conditions of their classroom, school, and districts (DuFour, 2006).

Common Assessments: teachers work in professional learning communities to develop higher level questions from various levels of Bloom's taxonomy to check students'

comprehension. The questions are composed of content material that all teachers have taught to a particular grade level or within a particular subject (DuFour, 2006).

Crucial Conversations: “a high stakes, opinionated, and strongly run on emotions conversation” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, p. 3). This is a time when educators talk truthfully about situations.

Culture of Celebration: In professional learning communities a culture of celebration is described as a purposeful celebration that is the responsibility of everyone, with a clear link between recognition and the behavior or commitment you are attempting to encourage and reinforce. The opportunities for many winners are created through the celebration (DuFour, 2006).

Data versus information: Data that stands alone and does not affect practice or lead to informed decisions. A transformation from data to information requires a comparison (DuFour, 2006).

Essential Learnings: The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learning may also be referred to as essential outcomes or power standards (DuFour, 2006). **Formative assessments:** A test used to advance, not to monitor, students’ learning (Stiggins, 2002). The End of Grade and End of Course test are examples of formative assessments.

Interventions: A school-wide plan that ensures every student in every grade level will receive additional time and support for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills (DuFour, 2006). **Norms:** Protocols and commitments

developed by each team to guide members in working together are called norms. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals (DuFour, 2006). To ensure that all teachers share an equal responsibility for the duties in the PLC, norms are developed. Norms could be as simple as all members will show up on time for meetings and as explicit as all team members will share in creating data charts. Norms help develop the school culture.

Professional Learning Communities: Composed of collaborative grade level or departmental teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all. Through collaboration, teachers review student data and plan interventions for students who are not being successful. Each member is mutually accountable (DuFour, 2006). The responsibility of the teams is to ensure that all students learn.

School Culture: The assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norms for a school and guide the work of the educators within it (DuFour, 2006). School culture is an important part of professional learning communities.

SMART Goals: Goals that are strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound (O'Neill & Conzemius, 2006). Professional learning communities also develop SMART goals to monitor the progress of students. These goals set standards to challenge the rigor of student instruction. A SMART goal may be composed as: the reading level of all third grade students will increase by 10% from the first benchmark test to the second benchmark test.

Systematic interventions: A school-wide plan that ensures that students at every level receive additional time and support for learning during the school day. Systematic interventions are required, not optional, for each student in need (DuFour, 2006).

Chapter Summary

In summary, Chapter one introduced the main idea of this study. The study explores the influence of professional learning communities on professional practices. The study further examines the effect that collaboration and support have on teacher retention. Background information shows that new teachers are leaving the field of education at an alarming rate; several reasons are given to support this action. Teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities and the impact teachers feel professional learning communities have on retention and teachers' professional practices will be captured through this research.

The study is based on the following assumptions: an increase in job satisfaction for new and veteran teachers increases teacher retention; participation in the PLC process affects teachers' desire to stay in the field of education, and by working in professional learning communities, teachers learn the curriculum and best practices at a faster pace, thereby impacting their professional practice. Key terms and definitions beneficial to understanding professional learning communities are discussed. Chapter one laid the foundation of the study and the reason this study is valuable and will contribute to the knowledge base in education.

CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW

“Every teacher is a theoretician; a teacher exerts thousands of theories a day in the classroom... to say, ‘but will it work in practice’ can as readily be replaced with, ‘but will it work in theory.’”

(Zimpher, 2002)

Introduction

“The question confronting most schools and districts is not, ‘What do we need to know in order to improve?’ But rather, ‘will we turn what we already know into action?’” (Eaker, DuFour, DuFour, & Many, 2006, p. 1). Professional learning communities are based on the practice of learning by doing. The use of authentic, hands on exercises to develop teachers’ capacity to function as a team working towards a common goal of increasing student achievement is the theory in practice of professional learning communities. The commitment to each student learning is the main focus of professional learning communities (DuFour, 2006).

Teachers in professional learning communities should act as catalysts moving quickly to turn visions into reality. The vision of professional learning communities is to explore a better way to achieve the goals of the organization. Reflections and assessments of professional learning communities are a continued effort of all members. “We do not argue that the professional learning communities’ journey is an easy one, but we know with certainty that it is a journey worth taking” (Eaker, DuFour, DuFour, & Many, 2006, p. 12). Recruiting and retaining teachers is a difficult task for school districts and school leaders but a necessary one for schools to be successful. Though the body of work on teacher retention is

extensive, the findings are inconsistent on the reason for the cause behind teacher turnover (e.g., Bluedorn, 1982; Halaby & Weakliem, 1989; Horn & Griffeth, 1995; Kelleberg & Mastekaasa, 1998; March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, 1982; Mueller & Price, 1990; Price 1977, 1989; Steer & Momday, 1981). Though low levels of turnover are needed to prevent organizations from becoming turbulent and unstable, high levels of teacher turnover cause school systems to resort to lower standards to fill positions. This practice affects student achievement and the overall function of the school environment. This is particularly problematic in hard to staff areas such as small, rural districts.

Research on teacher retention shows younger teachers leave the field of education at a much higher rate than veteran teachers (e.g., Bobbitt et al., 1994; Boe et al., 1998; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987, 1992, 1997; Hafner & Owings, 1991; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1988). Typically, the areas of special education, mathematics, and science are found to have high attrition rates (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Grissmer & Kirby, 1992; Murnane et al., 1991; Rumberger, 1987). The literature will look at several theories that influence teacher turnover.

This literature review is organized in the following manner: After presenting a brief overview of professional learning communities, a review of the research examines the definition of professional learning communities, adult learner theory, and teacher professional practices. The literature review then examines research relating to teacher retention and professional learning communities.

Adult Learning Theory

Ways to improve teacher professional practices include the development of mentoring programs and efforts to improve teachers' working conditions through organizational change. Many teacher mentoring environments are modeled after concepts in adult learning theory. This theory looks at adults as learners and explains what they need in order to be successful learners. Malcolm Knowles is a pioneer in the field of adult learning theory. The following key characteristic of adult learners is noted by Knowles:

- Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. Specifically, they must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to be sure to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. Finally, they must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals (e.g., via a personal goals sheet).
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, they should draw out participants' experience and

knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.

- Adults are *goal-oriented*. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of goals and course objectives must be done early in the course.
- Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This means, also, that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests.
- Adults are *practical*, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and

knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class. (Knowles, pp. 83-84)

Several key points are made in this theory. Adult learners will commit to learning when they feel they are learning things that are worthwhile and useful. Goals and objectives must be realistic and important to them. They must be able to apply what they are learning to the “real world” (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007, as cited in Knowles, 1984). They must see how it is important and relevant to the adult learners’ personal and professional needs (Speaks, 1996). According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), “Adult learners that enter today's higher education community bring learning styles and life experiences that may either be critical foundations for future success or deeply entrenched beliefs that hinder learning in the academic environment” (p. 87). What is missing in teacher mentoring programs is that teachers are only working with one other teacher and only for a short period of time. Also, the degree of effectiveness with which teachers work with and learn best practices from their mentors is highly uneven; in many cases the mentoring relationship exists in name only. These key deficiencies as well as sustained continued commitment to learning are addressed in professional learning communities.

Adults want to take ownership of their own learning and learn about areas where they feel they lack knowledge. When adult learners are forced to learn things they are not interested in, they will not participate in an authentic manner as an engaged participant. Adult learners will also resist learning activities they believe are an attack on their competence. Thus, professional development needs to give participants some control over the

what, who, how, why, when, and where they learn in order to be useful to the participants (Speaks, 1996). This would be an organizational change from the top down model under which most school systems function.

In professional learning communities the purpose and goals are clear. All teachers are working towards a common goal. Mentoring programs need to meet the needs of teachers and provide them with information they feel is relevant to their jobs and information that will make their jobs easier. According to Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002):

The driving engine of the collaborative culture of a PLC is the team. All members of the staff are assigned to one or more teams that are called upon to work interdependently to achieve one or more common goals. Individual teachers give up a degree of personal autonomy in exchange for collective authority to answer the most critical questions of teaching and learning. Teams work together to clarify the intended outcomes of each grade level, course, or unit of instruction. They develop common assessments that they consider valid measures of student mastery. They jointly analyze student achievement data, draw conclusions, and establish team improvement goals. They support one another and share strategies and materials as they work together to accomplish goals that they could not achieve by working alone. (p. 3)

Adult learners must also be motivated. There are several motivating factors in adult learning theory. Knowles highlights six factors:

- **Social relationships:** to make new friends, to meet a need for associations and friendships.
- **External expectations:** to comply with instructions from someone else; to fulfill the expectations or recommendations of someone with formal authority.
- **Social welfare:** to improve ability to serve mankind, prepare for service to the community, and improve ability to participate in community work.
- **Personal advancement:** to achieve higher status in a job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors.
- **Escape/Stimulation:** to relieve boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a contrast to other exacting details of life.
- **Cognitive interest:** to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to satisfy an inquiring mind (Knowles, 1989).

Adult learners need to see a relationship between the professional development they are required to attend and the day-to-day activities they are responsible for performing. Adult learners need real life examples and models. Information should come in the form of direct, concrete experiences in which they apply the learning to real work. Mentoring programs must provide new teachers with situations and vignettes that will give advice on handling routine situations such as parent teacher conferences, discipline, and instructional presentations. Adult learning must be safe from embarrassment. Professional development

must protect participants, provide support from peers, and reduce the fear of judgment during learning. In professional learning communities, teachers take ownership for all learners at a grade level. Plans and strategies are used to help all students' master concepts and strategies.

Adults need to receive positive feedback and respectful corrective feedback on how they are doing. Opportunities to practice should be incorporated into professional development activities that allow the learner to practice what they are learning and to receive structured, helpful feedback for improvement. Adults need opportunities to share and to participate in small-group activities during the learning process to move them through the steps of Bloom's Taxonomy: understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In these small-groups teachers can share, reflect, and generalize their learning experiences. Adult learners must be able to learn from each other. Experiences, knowledge, self-direction, interests, and competencies must be accommodated in planning professional development. Adults must be coached to transfer learning and follow-up support is needed to help adult learners practice daily what they have learned so that it is sustained (Speaks, 1996). These qualities are also needed for many new teachers. New teacher programs that are based on the adult learner model must be evaluated to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the teachers the programs are designed to serve. Professional learning communities accommodate all the above criteria.

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention is an issue that districts and school systems have been battling for years. The U.S. Department of Education (2007) reported that almost a quarter of teachers

leave the teaching profession within their first three years of teaching. Ingersoll (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2003) found in 2001 that low-poverty schools have a turnover rate fifty percent lower than schools that serve high-poverty, minority students. High turnover may affect student learning by having more inexperienced teachers who are less effective in the classroom. High turnover creates instability in schools and does not allow for coherent instruction. High turnover is also very costly. School districts spend significant fiscal resources to recruit, train, and prepare teachers for teaching (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Grossman, 2007).

Teacher retention was once thought to be improved through mentoring programs and peer coaching. However, the teacher mentoring system of one veteran teacher guiding a novice teacher through the school year did little to increase student achievement or professional growth. Within the first five years 50% percent of all novice teachers leave the field of education, with 30% leaving in the first three years (Kelly, 2004; Maciejewski, 2007; Ingersol & Smith, 2004; Smith & Ingersol, 2004). Often teachers were too busy to accurately share best practices, and school schedules did not allow common time to look at student data. Though some of these efforts improved teacher retention, it did not serve the common good of influencing all areas of practice.

Peer coaching is a process by which adults with a common interest share knowledge and expertise. The collaborative peer model is used in the design of many teacher induction programs. The key component in this model is the transference of training to “real-world” settings which is supposed to allow teachers to implement what they have learned into the

classroom. Teachers are then supposed to evaluate what works and what does not work. Another purpose is to allow teachers to develop a mutually supportive relationship among coworkers (Showers, 1985). This relationship allows two teachers to work together but does not function as a true learning community.

In professional learning communities teachers are able to bounce ideas off each other and work to come up with best practices whereas peer coaching is only for a short period and the teachers only share ownership of one subject. With collaborative peer modeling, improved self-analysis and sense of efficacy is the focus. Teachers can see what they look like and make changes based on the outcomes desired. An improved sense of professional skills and desire for self-improvement becomes the teachers' focus and goal. Teachers learn to respect each other and appreciate the various experiences, teaching level, and backgrounds of peers (Robbins & Roberts, 1990). The focus of this model is on teacher performance.

Next, we will explore how teacher retention has been an issue facing educators from the 1980's to the present day. Several research projects have been conducted that focus on beginning teachers and not on sustaining teachers with a support system after their first three years of teaching.

The California Mentor Teacher induction Project (MTIP) was introduced in the 1980's with the primary objective to increase the retention of new teachers. Brown and Wambach (1987) carried out the evaluation in two phases. Phase 1 matched pre-service teachers with master teachers for seven weeks. Phase 2 matched first year teachers with master teachers for a year-long mentorship. The phase design sought to match teachers by grade levels and

curricular subjects. The results were based on phase two. The experimental group (the mentees) and the control group (teachers not in the project) were given a questionnaire. The teachers were asked would you continue to teach: (1) No, (2) unsure, (3) yes, probably, and (4) Yes, definitely. The results showed a slight positive effect for mentoring and the experimental group reported not returning as the more likely answer. The mean score for the experimental group was 3.0 while it was 2.3 for the control group. A marginal significant difference was seen ($p=.069$). This study was useful in that it followed the pattern of most research on teacher mentoring environments by looking at a state mentor program and compared two consecutive years, one with the program and one without. However, it did not look at what may have influenced this change nor did it report data on actual retention and turnover (Brown & Wambach, 1987). The research also failed to mention if teachers not in their first years of teaching remained at the school. Research shows that most teachers leave the teaching field in the first five years in the profession (Ingersol & Smith, 2004; Kelly, 2004; Maciejewski, 2007; Smith & Ingersol, 2004).

In 1990, the Toronto Teacher Peer Support Program was piloted. Cheng and Brown (1992) conducted an evaluation of this program. The program paired novice teachers with veteran teachers from similar grade levels or subject areas from the same school for two years in order to build learning communities. The study had an experimental group, teachers with mentors, and a control group, teachers without mentors. There were 17 teachers in each group the first year. The second year, there were 29 teachers in the experimental group and 43 teachers in the control group. Questionnaires were used to collect data. The following

questions were asked: how the new teachers rated their overall experience; was teaching the right professional choice for them; and did they plan to stay in teaching? The study found positive results for the program.

In the 1990-1991 school year, the first year mentees reported a positive experience 88% of the time, neutral feelings 6%, and negative feelings 6% of the time. The non-mentored group reported a positive experience 53% of the time, neutral feelings 23%, and negative feelings 24% of the time. In the second year, mentees reported a positive experience 86% of the time, neutral feelings 10%, and negative feelings 3% of the time. The non-mentored group reported a positive experience 76% of the time, neutral feelings 19%, and negative feelings 6% of the time.

When asked if they chose the right profession, the mentees unanimously reported that they had chosen the right profession. The non-mentored group reported that they had chosen the right profession 76% of the time, neutral feelings 19%, and negative feelings 6% of the time.

The participants were also asked would they choose the teaching profession again. In the first year, 94% stated yes, 0% were not sure, and 6% stated they would not choose teaching as a profession again. The non-mentored group reported 67% stated yes, 0% were not sure, and 13% stated they would not choose teaching as a profession again. In the second year, 87% stated yes, 0% were not sure, and 13% stated they would not choose teaching as a profession again.

Teachers were also asked whether they would stay in the teaching profession. The mentored group reported yes 76%, no 8%, and not sure 16%. The non-mentored group reported yes 60%, 27% were not sure, and 13% stated they would not choose teaching as a profession again. In year two, the mentored group reported 97% would stay in teaching, 3% were not sure, and 0% stated they would leave the profession. Of the non-mentored, 91% would stay in teaching, 9% were not sure, and 0% stated they would leave the profession (Cheng & Brown, 1992).

Richard Ingersoll (1999) has studied the issue of teacher retention extensively. He observed that failure to ensure adequate staffing for elementary and secondary schools has received more attention since the early 1980s than many other educational issues. National attention was brought to the issue with the release of several nationally publicized reports on the severe teacher shortage arising from teacher attrition due to “graying” and an increase in students’ enrollments in schools (e.g., Boe & Gilford, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1984; Haggstrom et al, 1988; National Academy of Science, 1997; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These studies predicted that schools unable to meet the demands for new teachers would have no choice but to lower standards to fill positions.

Several programs have been designed to lure candidates into teaching including “troops-to-teachers”, alternative certification programs, and Teach for America. School systems took a particular interest to entice the best and brightest professionals into teaching from the fields of science and math (Clinton, 1999). This article takes a sociological perspective. It looks at the social organization of the school in reference to teacher turnover and staffing but not the

characteristics of individual teachers. This research not only looks at a narrow subset of teacher turnover, but it examines teacher turnover as an organizational phenomenon. The author takes a two-fold approach: first to document teacher turnover and secondly to examine school organizational characteristics and conditions in teacher turnover.

The data for this study came from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the School Staffing Survey and its supplement, the Teacher Follow-up Survey. The results of this study showed that teacher turnover is a significant issue that affects the ability of schools to adequately staff classrooms with qualified teachers. Teacher characteristics such as specialty field and age account for a considerable amount of teacher turnover. The study demonstrated there are significant effects of school organizational characteristics that affect teacher turnover. The data showed high-poverty public schools have moderately higher rates of teacher turnover. However, large schools, public schools in large districts, and urban schools all have high rates of teacher turnover. Small private schools also have comparatively high rates of turnover.

The results indicated that teacher turnover among math and science teachers was higher than for other teachers and that teacher retirement had a minimal effect on turnover as compared to teachers who were dissatisfied with their jobs. Other factors that contributed to higher teacher turnover were inadequate support from administration, low salaries, student discipline problems, and limited faculty input into school decision making. The study further showed that school staffing was not due to a teacher shortage, but to a “revolving door” resulting from a large number of teachers leaving the profession. It also showed that

recruitment alone will not solve the problem if the organizational source of low retention was not dealt with in relation to staffing.

Professional learning communities not only address the issues of teacher turnover characteristics, but also organizational characteristics of the job. Through professional learning communities teachers can collaboratively work on problems such as student discipline. Teachers can become each other's support system and collaboratively come up with plans to help improve the total school environment.

In addition to the problem of finding highly qualified teachers in math and science, teacher turnover is also a problem in the area of special education. According to Jaimie Eson-Brizo (2010) the turnover rate for teachers in hard to staff areas such as special education is even worse and is growing each year. "Ludlow, Conner, and Schechter (2005) suggested that as many as 100% of teachers leave special education nearly every 3 years" (Eson-Brizo, 2010, p. 2).

According to the American Educational Research Association's Panel report edited by Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), the annual attrition percentage for special education teachers (6.8%) in the 1993-1994 school year was higher than that of the general education teachers (6.6%). Data from the TFS for the following year demonstrated that about twice as many teachers left special education teaching (15.3%) as left general education teaching (7.0%). The panel reported that special education teachers leave the teaching profession each year at almost twice the rate of general education teachers. (p. 3)

Eson-Brizo defines turnover by three components: leaving teaching employment, moving to a different school, and transferring from an assignment in special education to one in a general education classroom (as cited in Billingley, 2004b). The annual turnover rate in the teaching field in 1998 was 11%. In 2003-2004 the turnover rate was 16.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). The past fifteen years, the national teacher turnover rate has risen 16.8 percent. That is a 50 percent increase (Kain, 2011). Eson-Brizo further states that teacher turnover is a serious problem that has the following consequences: inadequate experiences, reduced achievement levels, and insufficient competence of graduates in the workplace (as cited in Billingley, 2004b). Research on teacher turnover is limited due to the lack of data and other limitations such as teachers not always providing the real reasons for leaving on exit surveys (Ingersoll, 2001).

Eson-Brizo's (2010) dissertation on mentoring programs to change attitudes related to turnover of special needs teachers took place in a university-based autism class. The problem in this study is that the preschool is facing high teacher turnover. The adjacent regular education preschool is not facing the problem of teacher turnover seen by the autism classes. Further evidence of the retention problem facing the autism preschool classes is the ad for teachers that ran four months out of the year on the web site, where the regular education preschool classes did not need to advertise for teachers.

The class had 157 young children with autism and 9 typically developing students. The school had 17 self-contained classrooms that ranged in class size from 6 to 10 students. The recruitment of teachers was as follows: in 2006-2007 six new teachers were hired for six

classroom vacancies. In 2007-2008 nine teachers were hired to fill 9 out of 18 classroom vacancies. In 2008-2009 four new teachers were hired to fill the available vacancies. In 2009-2010 six teachers were replaced. Various reasons were given for teachers leaving. Noted reasons for attrition have been time to complete work, poor salary, dissatisfaction with their career or school, and poor administrative support (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

The study's purpose was to create and implement a mentoring program that would decrease the number of teachers leaving by determining if teachers' attitudes had an effect on teacher turnover. The program was designed to have current new teachers return for the 2009-2010 school year. The program included interviews, classes, observations, individual support, and training as well as group support meetings. The interviews were used to determine attitudes before the mentoring program began. The teachers were mentored for twelve weeks. At the end of the twelve weeks the participants went through another interview to record attitude changes. Week one allowed time for participants and mentors to meet. During week two, the initial interview was held. Weeks three and four were for observations and feedback. Weeks five through nine were used for training. A second interview and closing discussions were held during weeks ten and eleven. From the information gathered during the interview the researcher was able to implement a mentor program for newly hired teachers. The participants were then asked to come up with eight topics which were relevant to them. The topics were used to help develop how the mentors would work with the participants.

The results showed the many of the teachers were happy in their classroom but not satisfied with the school. All of the teachers increased the time they initially stated they would stay in the field of education. Hiring freezes and staff cuts were other reasons for staying. The participants stated that the mentoring program helped but by the time it had started they had figured out or learned all the things they really needed a mentor to help them within the classroom (Eason-Brizo, 2010).

The study failed to look at why other teachers leave the field of education. It did not provide support after the twelve weeks were over. With professional learning communities, the teachers would not have to wait for a program to start. They would be able to begin at the beginning of the school year. Teachers would not have to wait for the mentor to get to know them because they would be in a group of teachers sharing problems and looking at how they could support all of their students. The strengths of the group would be shared, the weaknesses would be evaluated, and a strategic plan would be put in place to monitor improvements.

The research from the teacher follow-up survey from 2007-2008 is more accurate and gives a better picture of teacher turnover at present. In 2007-2008 the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found the following data to be true of the nearly four million public school teachers. Teachers who left the field of education equaled 7.6% of public school teachers and 15.9% of private school teachers. Teachers with 1-3 years of experience left teaching at a rate of 9.1% in 2007-2008 in public

schools and 20.6% in private schools. In 2008-2009, 8.9% of public school teachers left compared to 17.4% of private school teachers (Cross & Keigher, 2010).

Professional Learning Communities

A professional learning community (PLC) is defined as an extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). It is often used in schools as a way to organize teachers into working groups. In the 1920s John Dewey (1916, 1938) and Alexander Meiklejohn (1932) used many concepts of learning communities that are still being used today. At the university level, the researchers proposed social and communal learning. The traditional limitations of the educational system at that time did not accept many of these concepts. However, as early as 1960, the term professional learning communities was being used by researchers as an alternative to isolated common practices to teaching in the United States. To have well-functioning professional learning communities, time must be established so that each person can be a contributing member of a team. Three major themes are used to develop the conceptual framework for professional learning communities: (1) a foundation of collaborative development that consists of shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that are working together for a common goal, and (3) a focus on outcomes as proof of an assurance of continuous improvement (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). During this time teachers were asked to keep the three general questions in mind (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What are we going to do if they do not learn?

Schools must then come up with a mission and a vision that reflect student learning. To create a vision statement, the team is required to look at best practices for teaching that are research based. It should not be a wish list, but a list of essential learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). An essential part of professional learning communities is the focus on learning and not teaching. All students are expected to have high levels of learning. Many school systems operate on the notion that all children are taught, not that all children will learn. Collaboration is also a key concept in making professional learning communities work. Without collaboration and buy-in from teachers, learning communities will not have the focus needed to discuss important issues (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Teachers must have a desire to want to look at best practices and be willing to change their professional practices accordingly. The use of shared knowledge should guide decisions. Teachers must be inquirers in learning communities with a sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

After learning and committing to the foundation of learning communities, teachers must take action. Teachers must act on what needs to be done in a timely manner. The teams serve as catalysts for action by engaging in collective inquiry. Teachers realize that most learning takes place through action. Learning by doing helps students develop a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Teachers in professional learning communities “avoid paralysis by analysis and overcome inertia with action” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 4).

Participants in learning communities also strive to constantly improve. Teachers work together to come up with better ways to teach skills or accomplish goals set by the team. Teachers may give common assessments and decide that one teacher is more proficient in a skill area than another and for that reason that teacher would teach that skill and show other teachers how to improve in teaching the same skill. The purpose is not to just learn a new strategy but to create conditions for continuous improvement for learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006; Stiggins, 2005). The efficiency of the learning community is not based just on continuous changes and improvements but on the students’ tangible results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Teams are asked to come up with norms that will govern their meetings. The meeting time is not for venting problems not related to student achievement or planning for grade level items. SMART goals are then developed. SMART is the acronym for strategic and specific goals (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Goals are measurable and attainable; they must be realistic. Results-oriented and time-bound, goals must have a time period in which they should be completed. Once the goals are developed, teachers then look at data to see which students are meeting goals, which students are not meeting goals, and which students are excelling and surpassing the goals set (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). A plan is developed for each group of students. A final step in professional learning communities is celebrations. Teams need to celebrate success often (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002).

They further assert that professional learning communities are needed in order to keep up with the incredible amount of changes in today's society. In the 1980s and 1990s research on professional learning communities became more prominent.

The North Carolina Department of Instruction quotes Shirley Hord of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory as saying that as an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement (Hord, 1997). The term learning community has become included in the dictionary of American education. Some educators see it as an extension of classroom practice that moves into the community, the use of community resources, both material and human. For others, it means taking community personnel in the school to improve the curriculum and students' learning (Hord, 1997).

Professional learning communities in educational settings help teachers better understand best teaching practices and improve teaching performance by looking at what the students have and have not learned. Teachers are able to adjust and modify teaching practices to meet the needs of their students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Through professional learning communities, gaps can be closed by grade levels or departments looking at the big picture and coming up with a plan that will support all students. Through professional learning communities the focus is taken off teacher performance and placed on student achievement. It further looks at the entire cohort of a grade level or subject and not individual classes. The organization of professional learning communities and the commitment to working together is the foundation for professional learning communities.

However, this relationship alone does not complete the process. It is imperative that teachers make changes to improve student achievement and this change must be seen through analysis of student data.

Julene Bassett's dissertation, *It is not good that man should be alone: What Adam and Eve can teach us about relationships in learning communities* (2009), takes a look at the interpersonal relationships between teachers. The author takes the standpoint that educational environments view learning as an individual occurrence. This practice is further created through competition and rewards for individual accomplishments. The cultural shift from isolated teaching to learning communities is being used by educators to rectify the problem. The study examines what it means for teachers to be related through the fundamentals of teaching and how student achievement is impacted. Bassett looks at community two ways in this study; how we should be related and how we should come together.

The study takes a narrative approach by using the story of Adam and Eve to explore human relationships for education. Three stories are used: the creation of the world through Adam and Eve, their fall, and their expulsion from Eden. This is connected to diversity, unity, and work. The connection of these three terms is used to define learning community in the study. Moral responsibilities to others are the suggested purpose of this study for the need to have learning communities. The problem in this study is that teachers have no moral responsibilities to support or help each other within the traditional structure of schooling. The author suggests that without this key concept, learning communities cannot be

successful. The author uses a religious narrative because it offers a framework for creating communities that has been around for thousands of years and it is a view that is known by many readers, both religious and non-religious.

This narrative study continues with a comparison between the creation of the earth as to why learning communities are important. She used the first chapter of Genesis to illustrate that relationships have a particular purpose in mind and these associations are good because they are productive. The author further looks at the pattern of organization used by God to bring about relationships with each element. The elements have responsibilities to one another through the work performed. The creation of Adam and Eve by God is related to teachers working in isolation. The author refers to God's purpose for creating Eve for Adam so that he would not be alone. She relates this to it not being good for teachers to work alone. The command from God to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply demonstrates in this study that the organization by God caused fruitfulness. In a similar way, the organization of professional learning communities may also be productive for teachers.

This narrative dissertation is a creative way to look at learning communities. Through using the bible, which may not be a recognized body of work by all readers, the author was able to explain the concepts and purpose of professional learning communities. The need for teachers to work together and not in isolation is a key concept. The organization of learning communities is also important to the function and the productivity of the organization. Without clear understanding and organized implementation, the relationships needed to bring teachers together will not be created. This dissertation compares the religious narrative to

professional learning communities whereas this proposed research seeks to understand whether teachers feel professional learning communities help retain teachers.

Further research shows that teacher acceptance of the professional learning community process is important for implementation. A utilization-focused inquiry approach is used in the dissertation study of Angela Besendorfer (2008) to acquire feedback to improve the development of the professional learning community model in five rural Missouri schools to see if the model improves student achievement. Schmoker (2006) argues that professional learning communities are the “surest, fastest path to instructional improvement” (p. 105). The main focus is to look at the core principles of a professional learning community. The implementation of Besendorfer’s study takes place in a high school, middle school, and three elementary schools with the help of a regional consultant. Leadership teams from all schools were trained first at each building. The teams then trained the rest of the staff. The district supported the training by implementing a district-wide late start initiative to allow teachers time to collaborate. Information was collected through focus groups, interviews, and document reviews regarding the implementation of professional learning communities. The similarities and differences were highlighted and analyzed for common themes.

The data analysis revealed three common themes across the district: concept of collaboration, time as a resource, and the function of leadership. Motivating factors along with barriers to implementing professional learning community were examined. The process used to implement professional learning communities at the building level of each school was also examined. This included background information, school setting, and student

achievement. The findings showed that even though all the schools had the same technical implementation process, the results were very different. All of the participating schools had some levels of conflict; however, the three elementary schools were the most successful, followed by the high school, and lastly the middle school. Though the leadership teams had a clear understanding of the professional learning community process, the buy-in from teachers varied at different levels which did not allow collaboration at all levels and in fact, only allowed pockets of acceptance. The study demonstrated that if teachers were not receptive to professional learning communities then the process would not be effective. That is why it is important to find out how teachers feel about the process. Teachers' perceptions are very important in the implementation process because without their willingness to participate, no matter how well thought out the implementation plan is, it will not be successful.

Nolan (2009) examined teacher efficacy in relationship to professional learning communities. This quantitative study of ten Louisiana public schools participating in the second year of the Louisiana 9th Grade Redesign Initiative was conducted to explore interrelationships between teachers' self-efficacy and professional learning communities. The researcher used Bandura's social cognitive learning theory of self-efficacy and Hord's dimensions of professional learning communities. The School Professional Staff as Learning Community (SPSLCQ) instrument developed by Shirley Hord and the Teacher Efficacy Beliefs System-Self (TEBS-S) developed by Amy Dellinger was used in this study. The

instruments were given to 248 participants in 10 schools. The validity of the study was confirmed by Cronbach alpha reliability estimates.

The study had two main purposes: to investigate the degree to which professional learning communities exist as the primary organizational structure at the school participating in the Louisiana 9th grade Redesign Initiative grand and to determine the degree to which professional learning communities impact teacher self-efficacy. The research showed that teachers' self-efficacy is directly related to student performance and achievement in the classroom. The influence of professional learning communities on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs was limited and the researcher viewed this as an area of urgency for research. The respondents tended to perceive that their schools were functioning as professional learning communities and had moderate to strong teacher self-efficacy beliefs. This was based on the mean score being above the midpoint on the Likert-type response scales. Several of the correlations were statistically significant. However, without maintaining the same staff, no program will be successful if it continuously has to regroup and reteach. Teachers staying in current positions are still a key component in the success of school programs and in student achievement. Also, it is hard to get teachers' true perceptions without asking and talking to the teachers directly. A quantitative study would not be the best approach for finding out how teachers really feel about professional learning communities and their possible impact on teacher retention.

Perceptual Theory

My great uncle Dr. Dudley Flood would say “people do not see themselves the way they think of themselves, nor do they see themselves the way others think of them, but in fact they see themselves the way they think others see them.” Whether true or false perception creates insight into one’s world, thus shaping the opinions and often the decisions a person makes about life. Another way to look at perception is that it is an extension of both customs and beliefs as it centers on common assumptions: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987). Perceptual theory looks at those opinions and decisions in an effort to understand how human behavior is influenced by our experience.

A review of literature on perceptual theory is included because this study focuses on teachers’ perceptions of professional learning communities and teacher retention. Perceptual theory retains the belief that human behavior is the creation of the unique ways that individuals interpret the world. The perceptual perspective places awareness at the center of behavior. It suggests that people are not influenced by events so much as by their perception of events (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Purkey and Novak acknowledge the power of human perception and the influence it has on self-development. The following key points are made by Purkey and Novak (1996):

1. Every person wants to be accepted and affirmed as valuable, capable, and responsible, and wants to be treated accordingly.
2. Every person has the power to create beneficial messages for themselves and others, and because they have this power, they have the responsibility.

3. Every person possesses relatively untapped potential in all areas of learning and human development.

4. Human potential is best realized by creating places, programs, policies, and processes intentionally designed to invite optimal development and encourage people to realize this potential in themselves and others.

Several researchers such as Purkey and Novak (1984, 1988), Purkey and Schmidt (1987, 1990), and Purkey and Stanley (1991) have sought to explain singularities in human perceptions that provide a means of deliberately calling people to realize their relatively infinite possibilities in all areas of valuable human endeavor. The purpose is to understand the nature of human presence and to make life a more exciting, satisfying, and enriching experience.

Summary of the Literature Review

From the 1980's to the present, teacher retention has been a significant issue facing educational systems. The development and implementation of professional learning communities may have an effect on teachers' professional practices by creating a cultural shift which empowers teachers with a greater sense of ownership in the school and less professional isolation. When teachers feel successful and are given the tools needed to perform their jobs, they embrace issues and challenge themselves to make improvements. Adult learning theory explains how adults see learning and what motivates them to learn. With the growing problem of teacher turnover, it is necessary for school districts to develop systems that will help retain teachers. Teachers' perceptions of professional learning

communities are one way to gain feedback on how teachers feel professional learning communities affect teachers' professional practices, if at all.

CHAPTER III RESEARCHED METHODS

Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology used in carrying out the study, giving special emphasis to the analysis of data. The study was conducted to determine whether teachers' professional practices are influenced by working in professional learning communities. The initial undertaking of the study was to look at the cultural shift, the move from teaching in isolation to teaching and working in cooperative groups by grade levels or teams, of professional learning communities as an education reform that could help reduce teacher turnover. Data from this study was drawn primarily from interviews with teachers, which will be explained later in this chapter.

Research Design

A qualitative research design with an action research approach was chosen because it is the most appropriate and effective manner to address teachers' perceptions and to answer the research questions. By using a reflective process teachers can determine if professional learning communities assist in addressing issues of teacher retention and whether involvement in PLCs affects or impacts their professional practice. Another reason qualitative research was appropriate for this study is because it provided a vehicle through which to obtain a more thorough understanding of human behavior and the reasons behind those behaviors. Since the focus of qualitative research studies is on decision making, a smaller sample of teachers was used. Structured interview questions were used in order to

determine the attitudes of ten teachers who have participated in professional learning communities.

Case Study Design

Cohen and Manion (1989) ask, “How can knowledge of the way in which children learn and the means by which schools achieve their goals be verified, built upon, and extended?” (p. 124). One way to explore this is through a case study. According to Stake (1995), “A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (p. xi). Another suggestion for defining a case study is that a case study is a research strategy, an experimental inquiry that probes a phenomenon within its real-life setting. This study is a collective case study of ten teacher profiles. The profiles shed light on teachers’ perception of professional learning communities and the impact they feel professional learning communities have on teachers’ professional practices and teacher retention.

This collective case study of teacher profiles looks at professional learning communities as a “research strategy” to discern whether teachers see professional learning communities as helping improve teachers’ professional practices and teacher retention. The unit of analysis was the professional learning communities. If professional learning communities are implemented correctly, will teachers’ perceptions of them be positive toward influencing teacher professional practices?

Case studies look at the uniqueness and commonality of people and programs (Stake, 1995). Through this study a probe was conducted of teachers’ views and understanding of professional learning communities and their perception of how it affects teacher retention. A

collective case study was the appropriate approach for this study because it used teacher profiles to analyze perceptions teachers have of professional learning communities and their possible effect on teachers' professional practices.

Two methodologists in the field of case study research, Robert Stake and Robert Yin, have examined the multiple facets of case study research. "First, both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one's perspective" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). This paradigm "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity. Pluralism, not relativism, is stressed with focus on the circular dynamic tension of subject and object" (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 10).

Reality as a social construction is the principle constructivism is built upon (Searle, 1995). One advantage point of using this method is the unique relationship between the researcher and participants, while allowing the participants to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The profiles allow the participants to describe their view of reality and through these encounters the researcher can better understand participants' actions (Lather, 1992).

Site and Sample Selection

The study took place within a school district which has participated in the Triangle High Five Training for professional learning communities. This was done to ensure that it is the expectation of local school and school district officials to implement professional learning communities and to ensure that the district and the school had access to various levels of

training--out of district, in district, and at the school level--in the implementation of professional learning communities. The district began professional learning communities in 2006. Principals were trained along with leadership teams at the school level. The common philosophy of Triangle High Five Training is: “Collaboration, Common Curriculum, Common Assessments, Collective Prevention and Intervention, and Confirmed Instructional Practices” (Westover, 2008).

A school that had high teacher retention and a school that had low teacher retention were selected as sites from which to draw the sample (teachers). The schools are in a district that has expectations that schools are participating in professional learning communities. Second, ten teachers were chosen. The teachers were chosen because they were veteran teachers at the schools who had participated in professional learning communities. These teachers had completed the beginning teacher training and had completed the district staff development for professional learning communities.

This study used purposeful sampling in which the subjects were chosen by the researcher based on judgment of their typicality (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Patton (2002) further describes the purposeful sampling as criterion sampling “picking all cases that meet some criterion” (p. 243). The criteria used are: they must have worked at the sample schools for five years or more and their level of participation in professional learning communities must have been participation in at least one weekly PLC meeting.

Two schools were explored in this study, one school from the northern section of the district and one school from the southern section of the district. The district is divided into

two elementary groups based on the location of the schools in the county. Schools in the northern section of the county comprise the northern group and schools in the south comprise the southern group. Mason School from the northern section of the district was selected because it had experienced four years of low turnover, is a magnet school with 206 students, and demonstrated high growth in the 2010-2011 school year; and Bragtown school from the southern section of the district because it had the highest turnover rate. There is one other school with a higher turnover rate but it was not chosen because it had only been open two and a half years and would not provide enough data. Bragtown School is a traditional school with 771 students, and has high growth from the 2010-2011 school year.

Table 3.1 Percent of teacher turnover and growth for each school

School	10/11	9/10	8/9	7/8	6/7	5/6
Bragtown	36% HG	15% HG	20% G	19% HG	28% G	19% G
Mason	6% HG	11% HG	6% NM	10% NM	23% G	35% NM
	District 18%	District 18%	District 14%	District 14%	District 14%	District 14%
	State 10%	State 11%	State 12%	State 12%	State 21%	State 21%

Denotes an average teacher turnover rate higher than the district and/or the state.

Bragtown had a higher teacher turnover rate five years in a row.

HG= high growth

G= growth

NM= not met

Other similarities to the school district and state are that Mason has about 18 teachers with 100% fully licensed. Teachers with advanced degrees make up 39% of the teachers at

the school, which is 7% higher than the school district at 32% and 10% higher than the state average of 29% fully licensed. The school also has four national board certified teachers. Eleven percent of the teachers at Mason School have 0-3 years of experience, compared to 18% for the district, and 18% for the state. Thirty-three percent of the teachers have 4-10 years of experience, compared with, 35% for the district, and 33% for the state. The last category of teachers is those with 10 plus years of experience (61% for the school, 48% for the district, and 49% for the state respectively) (<http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>).

Four teachers at Mason School were selected to participate in the interview process. Two teachers were Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers and two teachers were drawn from grades first through third grade teachers. Because this school is a magnet school, the teachers have taught multiple grades at one time to meet the requirements of the magnet program at the school. Mason School is a small school and only has two teachers per grade level. For that reason, only four teachers met the requirements for the research project.

Bragtown School has 41 teachers with 100% fully licensed. Teachers with advanced degrees make up 29% of the teachers at the school, which is 3% lower than the school district at 32% and the same as the state average at 29% fully licensed. The school also has one national board certified teacher. Twenty-four percent of the teachers at the school have 0-3 years of experience, compared with 18% for the district, and 18% for the state. Thirty-seven percent of teachers at the school have 4-10 years of experience, compared with 35% for the district, and 33% for the state. The last category of teachers is those with 10 plus years of experience (39% for the school, 48% for the district, and 49% for the state respectively). For

Mason School the turnover rate is 6%, which is 12% lower than the district at 18%, and 4% lower than the state at 10%. For Bragtown School the turnover rate is 36%, which is 18% higher than the district at 18%, and 16% higher than the state (<http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>).

Six teachers at Bragtown School were selected to participate in the interview process. The teachers were selected based on the same requirements as Mason School. The teachers were veteran teachers who had completed the district training for professional learning communities. The teachers who participated in this study were active in their grade level meetings.

Elementary schools were chosen because of the researcher's interest in professional practices in elementary schools. High schools and middle schools are departmentally based with periods that allow common planning times. Elementary teachers are not given common planning times unless it is built into their schedules by the school administrator. Elementary teachers are responsible for all areas of study whereas high school and middle schools have only one area of concentration. It is more of a challenge for them to work in professional learning communities and make them work.

Teacher Working Conditions Survey

In North Carolina, teachers are given a survey of working conditions. The survey looks at teachers' perceptions in the following areas community, development, empowerment, facilities, instruction, leadership, student conduct, and time. Ninety percent, over 100,000

teachers in North Carolina, rate their perceptions of how they feel their school is doing in each of the areas.

The teacher working conditions survey from 2010 was reviewed for Bragtown School and Mason School. Mason School scored higher in all areas of the teacher working conditions. This school also had a higher retention rate than Bragtown School. Both schools rated time lower as an area of concern rating this area 41% for Bragtown School and 64% for Mason School. The highest score in any category for School B was facilities at 74%. School M rated facilities at 76%. The highest score in any category for School M was student conduct at 93%. School B rated student conduct at 64%. School B's rating range from 74%-41% and School M's ratings range from 93%- 64%.

Table 3.2 Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2010 Bragtown

Teacher Working Condition Standards	Score
Community support	73.3
Development	66.2
Empowerment	61.4
Facilities	74.3
Instructional practice	68.9
Leadership	59.2
Student conduct	64.4
Time	41.6

Table 3.3 Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2010 Mason

Teacher Working Condition Standards	Score
Community support	90
Development	72.3
Empowerment	81.9
Facilities	76.1
Instructional practice	73.8
Leadership	77.3
Student conduct	93.6
Time	64.3

<http://ncteachingconditions.org/archive2010/reports/>

Over 100,000 licensed teachers participate in the online Teacher working conditions survey in all 100 counties in North Carolina. The information is often used to initiate policy changes and to develop school improvement plans. School districts use the information to enhance weak areas and to assist in deciding where additional funding is needed. Principals use the information to reflect on current programs being used at their schools and where staff development is lacking. The survey is perceived as being an outlet for teachers to express their opinions about what they perceive to be right and wrong with their school and school district.

Information from the survey can be used to praise or reprimand school administrators. With this knowledge, are the results from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey completely valid? Some administrators would say no. For instance, if an administrator has been assigned to a low performing school to bring about changes, and teachers have been asked to participate in staff development or training they do not deem

relevant, are those teachers more or less likely to report a positive or negative working environment? If negative, the results then may be used to initiate change based on false information. Teachers may use their personal feelings about the changes as relevant or a way to get back at an administrator not realizing that the negative data will affect the school, students, and staff for years to come.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

There are four kinds of face-to-face interviews: structured, unstructured, non-directive, and focused (Cohen & Manion, 1989). This research employed structured interviews. Structured interviews consist of “one in which the content and procedures are organized in advance” (Cohen & Manion, 1989, p. 309). In structured interviews the researcher has little freedom to make changes to the wording of the questions (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Cohen and Manion further state that three attributes need to be present in interviews: trust, curiosity, and naturalness. Trust allows the interviewer and interviewee to pursue a common mission free of personal egos. Curiosity addresses the desire to know people’s views and perceptions. Naturalness is the ability of the interviewer to be unobtrusive in order to get a clear picture of the interviewees’ thoughts. The data is then used to substantiate or reject the hypothesis (Cohen & Manion, 1989). The interview questions are listed in Appendix A. The researcher developed the interview questions from the research questions. In addition, the interview questionnaire has some questions that provided the researcher with background and demographical information about the participants (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004).

The researcher took notes throughout the interviews. The interviews were set up to allow the participants to share their perceptions and professional experiences working in

professional learning communities. This allowed the researcher to see if the teachers' perceptions of why the school has low teacher turnover/high teacher retention at the school are affected by their work in professional learning communities. The interviews were conducted after school from 35minutes to an hour per individual. If for some reason an interviewer cannot meet due to illness or leave a phone interview will be conducted. Two of the interviews occurred over the phone due to illness. The interviews were tape-recorded.

The research questions came from the researcher's experience with professional learning communities. The researcher has participated in monthly implementation training of professional learning communities which gives insight to the components of professional learning communities and has attended several professional learning community workshops by Rick and Becky DuFour, Doug Reeves, and Anthony Muhammad. The researcher has participated in professional learning communities at the administrative level and over see school-level professional learning communities.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to gather useful information to answer the research questions in the study. The research questions were developed to help gain insight about the attitudes of the participants in the study about professional learning communities. The research and interview questions came from existing research by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006), Eson-Brizo (2010), and from the researcher's own professional experience, fitted into the context of this particular study's purpose. Two research questions formed the foundation of the study:

(1) In what ways, if any, are teachers' professional practices affected by working in professional learning communities? and (2) Are teachers working in professional learning communities more likely to remain in the field of education?

To answer these questions, the researcher interviewed ten participants. The interview contained nine questions. Questions in the interview correlated to the research questions (See Appendix A for the list of interview questions).

Research question 1 aligned with interview questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 13. The responses from the interviews allowed the researcher to determine if teachers perceive that working in professional learning communities affected their decision as professionals. The questions gave insight into whether they feel professional learning communities have an impact on their professional practices.

Research question 2 was designed to explore the possible impact of involvement in PLCs on teacher retention. The researcher was interested in seeing if common planning, data analysis, essential learnings, and other components of professional learning communities improved the work lives of teachers and thus impacted teacher retention (the theory being that teachers who feel more empowered are more likely to remain in the profession). Questions 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12 are linked to this question (See Appendix A). In addition, the researcher transcribed the data by listening to the interviews and typing them into a word document. The data was then put into groups of meaningful segments. The segments were then coded into effects of professional communities on the teacher profession, professional learning communities as an agent of change, components of professional communities,

retention, perceptions of professional learning communities. The process was continues until all data was coded.

The information gathered during coding shaped the findings by highlighting themes that were repeated by the participants. The items that seemed to be the most important to the participants formed the categories for the coded segments. The information gathered in each segment was used to answer the research questions for this study.

Table 3.4 Data analyzes and coding

Codes	Kendra	Christy	Tameka	Ashley	Barbara
Affects of PLCs on the teaching profession	Sharing;	Work together	Work together	Work together	Share the work load
PLCs as an agent of change	Yes for new teachers (Not for veteran); Cause me to reflections and share feedback	Yes for new teachers (Not for veteran) Cause me to broaden my views and grow as a professional	Yes; Cause me to collaboration and use best practices	Yes if strong PLC; Cause me to collaboration and share feedback	Depends on personalities; Cause me to grow as a professional
Components of PLCs	Most useful component feedback; least useful component comparison of PLCs	Most useful component Sharing; least useful component too many meetings	Most useful component Sharing; least useful component must have the same things	Most useful component feedback; least useful component comparison	Most useful component Sharing; least useful component too many meetings
Retention	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; stay for students No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; stay for students No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; students, staff, and community No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; proximity and longevity No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; Students and longevity No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated
Perceptions of PLC	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. If PLCs works it will decrease if not increase; Sometimes PLCs are mostly engaging	Yes, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. Too many meetings increase; No PLC do not make school more engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. Depends on the administrators as to increase or decrease stress; No PLC do not make school more engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. It depends on the team working together; Yes PLC do not make school more engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. Too many meetings increase stress and burnout; I don't know if schools are more engaging

Table 3.4 Continued

Codes	Morris	Darren	Kelly	Jessica	Jennifer
Affects of PLCs on the teaching profession	Share the work load	Not beneficial	Not embraced not beneficial	Not embraced fully by team	Work together most of the time
PLCs as an agent of change	Yes due to collaboration; Cause me to grow as a professional grow as a professional	Not at all; Cause me to be a less effective as a teacher	Not at this time; Have not changed my professional practices	If PLC is implemented the right way then yes; It has taken from my planning time.	Yes for new teachers (Not for veteran); Cause me to collaborate and share
Components of PLCs	Most useful component sharing; least useful component sidebar conversations	No benefits verse having a regular meeting; least useful component meetings not productive	Most useful component Collaboration; least useful component coordination of meetings	Most useful component Relationships; least useful component to many meetings	Most useful component Collaboration; least useful component to many meetings
Retention	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; students No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; Absolutely not I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; Families and students No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; Magnet philosophy Yes I would leave	No I would not leave if members of PLC left; Magnet philosophy No I would not leave if PLCs were eliminated
Perceptions of PLC	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. Long hours lead to high stress level; Sometimes PLCs are mostly engaging	Yes, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. PLC increase my stress; PLCs are Not at all engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. PLC should minimize stress; No PLC do not make school more engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. More stress because I have less planning time; No PLC do not make school more engaging	No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. minimize stress; Yes PLC do not make school more engaging

Limitations of the Study

This study had the following limitations:

1. This design was limited to the data set and any findings or recommendations were not generalizable to all professional learning communities nor to all teachers. Depending on the successful implementation and operation of the PLC, different PLCs may or may not impact teachers' perspectives. This design only studied elementary school teachers. As such, it may not be generalizable to middle school or high school teachers participating in professional learning communities.
2. The teachers studied are from one demographic area and from two schools in one district in similar communities.
3. The small sample size was also a limitation to the study. The small size may not be representative of the views and opinions of the majority of teachers in the schools or in other schools.
4. The case study method also can be seen as a limitation because of the inability to draw cause and effect relationships or test hypotheses.
5. Both schools were public schools so the funding for implementation of PLCs was limited to the set amount provided by the district.
6. Teachers may not have felt comfortable telling how they feel because the researcher is a colleague of the building administrators at their perspective schools.

7. A limitation of the study may include possible bias as the researcher is an elementary school principal in the district who believes professional learning communities improve teacher professional practices. The researcher is aware of her ethical responsibilities as a practitioner and made every effort not to affect the study by her own personal beliefs.
8. The morale of the teachers in the two schools may be low due to not having a pay increase for four years and having cuts in services and positions at their schools. This may greatly impact retention regardless of any benefits accrued through participation in the professional learning community.
9. The time frame from when PLCs were implemented to the research study conducted may have affected the perceptions of the teachers. Teachers may have been more excited at the beginning of the PLC process.

Summary of the Methodology

To summarize, this was a qualitative case study of teachers in two schools that have operational professional learning communities. Mason School has high teacher retention and high growth. Both the retention and growth exceed the state and district percentages. Four participants with varied years of experience were chosen for individual interviews. Bragtown School had high teacher turnover and high growth. The teacher turnover rate was much higher than the district and the state teacher turnover rate. Six participants with varied years of experience were chosen for individual interviews. The researcher collected the

information and used the results to come up with the findings which are presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV RESEARCH RESULTS

Introduction

This section of the research study includes a brief introduction, the purpose of the study, and summary of the research method. Also included are the research questions which guided the study, interview questions, and interview data from the participants' responses. Finally, the findings from the answers to the research questions are provided.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether professional learning communities promote teacher retention and affect teachers' professional practice. The focus of the study was on elementary school teachers and their perceptions. In this study, the researcher determined the perceptions of ten teachers on teacher professional practices and teacher retention who participated in professional learning communities at their schools.

Upon approval from North Carolina State University IRB department on October 1, 2012 and Dawson Public Schools Research and Accountability Department on December 12, 2012, the researcher began fieldwork. The research design was a case study. The study was carried out as a single-phase study and used interviews to gather qualitative data from the participants. These data were used to determine the participants' perceptions. Participants were drawn from two schools, one with high teacher turnover and high growth, Bragtown School, and one with low teacher turnover and high growth, Mason School. This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the qualitative data from the two sample schools, Mason and Bragtown. Table 1 shows the interview schedule.

Table 4.1 Interview Schedule

Pseudonym	Interview Date	School
Kendra Brooks	January 19, 2013	Bragtown School
Christy Johnson	January 19, 2013	Bragtown School
Tameka Farrow	January 22, 2013	Bragtown School
Ashley Wilson	January 21, 2013	Bragtown School
Barbara Flood	January 29, 2013	Bragtown School
Morris Bowser	January 31, 2013	Bragtown School
Darren Bass	January 22, 2013	Mason School
Kelly Hall	January 30, 2013	Mason School
Jessica Jordan	February 7, 2013	Mason School
Jennifer O’Neal	February 8, 2013	Mason School

A total of ten teachers were selected to participate--six from Bragtown School and four from Mason School. All of the teachers were certified to teach. Furthermore, all teachers worked in professional learning communities at their respective schools. This section includes the research questions which guided the study and interview responses from the subjects. Through the interview process the following research questions were answered:

- **Research Question 1.** In what ways, if any, are teachers’ professional practices affected by working in professional learning communities?
- **Research Question 2.** Are teachers working in professional learning communities more likely to remain in the field of education?

Profile # 1: Kendra Brooks (Bragtown)

Kendra is an academically, intellectually, and gifted teacher at Bragtown. She has taught in the district for more than five years and is an active participant on PLC teams. She works with students on different grade levels so she has contact with several PLC teams.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Kendra has been teaching for a while and is confident in her teaching ability. She does not feel that a professional learning community forces her to give up any professional autonomy. She stated:

“No, I do not feel that I have to give up my professional autonomy. In fact I feel that it does just the opposite. By working in professional learning communities, I am able to learn from my fellow teachers and they push me to be a better teacher. I do, however, feel that professional learning communities impact teachers differently depending on the level of experience. I believe that everyone gains something from sharing in a PLC.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Teachers working in professional learning communities are often asked do they see professional learning communities as agents of change when it comes to negative attitudes.

“I think a strong, supportive professional learning community can help new teachers. However, a negative group or unaccepting group (clique) can have the opposite impact and cause a new teacher to flee. Depending on the group will depend on how effective the PLC is in changing negative attitudes and in helping newly hired teachers continue teaching at a school.”

When asked if professional learning communities had changed her professional practices, Kendra responded,

“It has given me more insight into the reflections of my coworkers through their feedback. I feel challenged to share more of my own reflections and feedback with them.”

The change for Kendra came from feeling safe and knowing that they were all there for one cause and no one was judging or pointing fingers at one another. They accepted their failures and congratulated each other on their accomplishments. The change for her was feeling free to expose her weak and strong points as a teacher.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

For Kendra, the most useful components of PLCs were reflections, common planning, assessments, shared ideas, and feedback. Kendra explained,

“the students became one big class and all the teachers took responsibility for each child. With the new common core curriculum, common planning was essential to making sure all students received the same standards and that all students were successful. We are able to make common assessment together and desegregate data for interventions.”

The component that was least useful was when PLCs are compared. She stated,

“I think sometimes it causes division among the staff if PLCs are compared. Each group has their own unique strengths and weaknesses. PLCs should never be compared to each other, much as a mother should not compare her children. A dysfunctional PLC should be dealt with privately without compromising confidentiality.”

Retention

Kendra is a veteran teacher at her school. She states the reason for her staying as,

“Loyalty to my students and co-workers and proximity to my home has not hurt.

I would not leave if my co-workers left. If they left, I would miss them and

understand their reasons for going. I would hope for equally competent co-workers to

take their places. If I ever leave, my PLC will not be the reason.”

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Kendra also shared her perception of her PLC team,

“I adore them. We work well together and are very supportive of each other through

thick and thin. I believe that we can share openly and honestly, giving each other

constructive feedback.”

When asked about teacher burnout and if working in a PLC increased or decreased burnout

Kendra stated,

“I think it depends on the PLC and how well they work together. A PLC that does

not work well together can cause intolerable stress and burnout, especially for a new

teacher.”

Kendra did express the view that working in a PLC made the school a more engaging place

to work.

“I am happier to have people to work with and share ideas, but I feel that I would

seek out the opportunity to work with certain individuals without being on a PLC. I

have always worked with my co-workers in order to best serve my students.”

It was very apparent that Kendra was confident as a teacher. She knew who she was and what she needed to do to be professional. She did not give professional learning communities the credit for that accomplishment. Her years of teaching gave her experience and assurance in her teaching style.

She was clear about what she felt affected teams in negative ways; dysfunction, cliques, and negative attitudes. She admitted that she could take or leave professional learning communities because they did not define who she was as a teacher and that she would naturally seek out peers she deemed to be on her professional level.

Profile # 2: Christy Johnson (Bragtown)

Christy is a literacy specialist at Bragtown School. She is a member of the site-based committee that guides and develops rules and procedures for the school. She is on the literacy committee and received additional university training in literacy. She has been a teacher at the school for more than 10 years.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Teachers value autonomy. It is what many teachers feel makes them unique. When Christy was asked if professional learning communities required teachers to give up professional autonomy she stated,

“Yes I do to some extent. I think collaboration is important but sometimes there are hidden agendas involved that can be frustrating. PLCs benefit all teachers when collaboration is used by all participants.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

The hidden agendas by members of professional learning committee teams often create negative attitudes. When teachers on a grade level had already met and came up with a plan to get what they wanted and not what was best for children, Christy felt there were hidden agendas in the purpose of the meeting. Christy did not feel that PLCs would be helpful for veteran teachers when there was a hidden agenda.

“For newly hired teachers, PLCs are effective in changing negative attitudes and helping newly hired teachers continue teaching at the school. Working in a PLC changed my professional practices. I think it has broadened my views and allowed me to grow as a teacher. If the negative attitudes and hidden agendas are taken away from PLCs then PLCs work effectively.”

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Giving teachers opportunities to share ideas was the most useful component Christy shared. Allowing teachers to share gave them creative ideas and new ways of teaching. The least useful component of PLCs for Christy was,

“When we have too many meeting that take too long and turn into gripe sessions that are not productive, is the least useful for me. The grip sessions are often about things we could not change. It seemed meaningless to discuss those things when we had things we could change.”

Retention

Christy stated that she stayed at Bragtown because,

“I feel strongly that all children deserve the best teachers and I have taught at Title I schools so that the student can have the best. Title I school often received fewer resources and for that reason deserved the best teachers.”

For that same reason, she stated she would also not leave her school if members of her PLC left her school.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Teachers’ perceptions of PLC teams are relevant to their beliefs of the benefits of being on a PLC team. When asked how she felt about her PLC team, Christy stated,

“I find that my team works together and that is beneficial to the grade level.

However, teacher burnout could be caused by PLC meetings. If there are too many PLCs held weekly I believe it increases stress and burnout.”

She did not feel that PLCs made her school more engaging. She loved her students and families and that was what attracted her to Bragtown. She stated,

“PLCs do make me more professionally satisfied. It is nice to have teachers who share the same interest and goals.”

Not a woman of many words, her statements were short but to the point. Christy felt the professional learning communities did affect her teaching style. She had no problem letting me know that she felt professional learning communities were used to cover up hidden agendas. Her words were carefully chosen. It was not clear if she was guarded or just not comfortable sharing. One thing for sure you did not get anymore than what she wanted to share.

She shared that her view point had been broaden and she had grown by in professional learning communities. Her words gave the impression that she was firm in what she believed in, but had changed some of her views after working with her team. It was clear that she found sharing as a valuable part of professional learning communities.

Profile # 3: Tameka Farrow (Bragtown)

Tameka is a third grade teacher leader. She had several add-on certifications and has taught for over twenty years. She also served as Bragtown’s teacher council representative and school improvement team member. She was a national board certified teacher and has been at the school for over six years.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Tameka is a veteran teacher and well recognized for her accomplishments at her school. When asked about giving up her professional autonomy to work in PLCs, she replied,

“No, I think PLCs are a great way to help veteran and beginning teachers to get new ideas and support. I feel that all teachers could learn from each other and make a better team.”

She went on to comment that PLCs were not around when she started teaching and that PLCs would have been a big help those first few years when developing one’s teaching style and curriculum. She continued to say she could not imagine new teachers not having to learn common core and not having PLCs as a support system. For this reason she felt that PLCs impacted all teachers equally.

“I do feel that it would impact all teachers equally if it is facilitated efficiently and effectively. Time management, all parties involved should be prepared, and a structured agenda would help.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Tameka was asked how effective she thought PLCs were. She replied, “I had a really good mentor but PLCs would have been a great asset if they were implemented when I started teaching. I don’t think it would have necessarily helped retain teachers. A good administrator retains good teachers with support and guidance. PLCs have encouraged me to work with different teachers and learners. It keeps me up to date with new research-based activities, new practical strategies for enrichment and remediation, and to build great rapport with teachers, resource teachers, and other staff members.”

Components of Professional learning Communities

As with any committee, there are useful and least useful components. Tameka believed that “The most useful component of PLCs is that teachers are able to get different prospective from teachers of all experiences and specialties. “ She thought that PLCs were:

“a way of bringing everyone together and not departmentalize teachers into what they taught. ESL teachers and EC teachers were providing best practices for regular education teachers.”

She stated that when working on issues she needed to have the same problems as the other teachers on her team.

“If you choose to work on a different standard it is hard if everyone else wants to work on that standard. That is different from autonomy.”

Tameka felt she could do what she wanted when she got in her room, but was not always interested in the agenda topics. She stated, “I feel like I have to have the same things as others. It almost takes away individuality.”

Retention

Tameka was asked why she stayed at Bragtown. She replied,

“I love the students, staff, and community, but I have been here for 10 years. I would like to see what it’s like at other schools; however, the district has not provided the opportunity for teachers to transfer.”

Tameka was also asked whether she would leave if other members of her PLC left. She replied,

“Many of the teachers I have worked with have left the district. I would leave too but I want to remain in the district”.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Tameka was asked how she felt about her PLC team. She replied,

“I feel pretty good about my PLC team but in any situation working with groups of people it has its challenges.”

She was also asked about burnout due to PLC involvement. She stated,

“It really depends on what the administrators are expecting as a product and how well the PLC works together. If the demands are realistic and the PLC is effective they should have a pleasant working environment which should minimize stress.”

When asked whether her PLC made her school a more engaging place to work, Tameka answered,

“It would if they weren’t consistently changing because of grade level changes or teachers leaving the school.” Tameka went on to say, “Yes, I have had the opportunity to work with some great teachers and learned a lot from them”.

When asked about being happier and more professionally satisfied. Tameka Stated,

“For the most part I like working in PLCs. I like my team. The long meetings and extra work that does not seem to fit in line with what we need as a team takes away from the planning and student centered conversations. If I had to choose whether to have them or not I would choose to have PLCs.”

Bubbly and upbeat is how I would describe Tameka. I got the feeling that she was a “go with the flow” teacher. She did what she was asked to do and was a team player. She was eager to share and gave a positive twist to her answers even when the responses were not in favor of professional learning communities.

Her ten year tenure at Bragtown did not seem to make her as loyal as some of the other participants. Though she loved her students and had a somewhat positive outlook on professional learning communities, she was open to seeing what other schools had to offer. I

was not sure if that was due to being complacent or just wanting a change to see what else the world of education had to offer.

Profile # 4: Ashley Wilson (Bragtown)

Ashley is an AIG teacher at Bragtown School. She has worked as the SES Coordinator and project reads coordinator for 6 years at the school. Ashley also has an elementary education certification.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Ashley loved her job and though PLCs posed some challenges for her, she did not feel that she had to give up professional autonomy to work in PLCs. She did feel that PLCs impact on teachers was “different, although everyone gains something.” Ashley felt,

“It depends on what you bring and what you want to get out of PLCs. If you bring an open mind and good ideas you will gain good ideas and information.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Ashley was asked whether PLCs were effective in changing negative attitudes. Her response was,

“A strong PLC can squash negative attitudes and provide encouragement, support, and build confidence for new teachers. However, some personalities can foster negativity.”

She stated her professional practice had changed due to being involved in her PLC: “I have learned from my peers’ experiences and feedback.” She did feel that change in a school could be brought about by a PLC but that the principal had to make sure that each team was

productive and on the same page. If the principal was not the team leader, most PLCs would just be a required meeting and not be as productive as possible.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

“Discussions and feedback around common planning and a shared focus is the most useful component of a PLC,” stated Ashley. With the new common core, Ashley felt it was helpful for her to know what to teach and when to teach it. Some of the standards were different and had not been taught at various grade levels. Since Tameka was an AIG teacher, she could help classroom teachers with the different standards now required at their grade level. The least useful component of the PLC was the “us against them” component.

The separate groups can foster an “us against them” attitude among the individual PLCs under the umbrella PLC that is the school. Some teams would not work with others or some departments did not share best practices or only shared with a particular grade level. Ashley felt that this caused teachers to work in isolated groups which defeated the purpose of being part of PLCs.

Retention

Teachers have different reasons for staying and leaving schools. Ashley chose to stay at Bragtown because of,

“Commitment and proximity to Bragtown. I was hired as a first year teacher at Bragtown; I have seen growth and positive changes over the years and look forward to more growth.” For this reason she would not leave Bragtown even if members of

her PLC team left Bragtown. “Bragtown took a chance on me and gave me my start.

So now I am committed to making it the best school I can.”

Perceptions of Professional learning communities

Ashley was asked how she felt about her PLC team. She stated,

“It works. My teaching practices have improved through the support and opportunities to share and ask questions”.

Ashley was also asked if PLCs minimized or increased teacher stress and burnout.

She stated,

“This depends on the willingness of the involved parties to accept a team attitude. Sharing our successes and failures with each other can lessen stress. Because we celebrate our successes and help each other with our failures, Bragtown is a more engaging place to work.”

Ashley could not say if she was happier or more professionally satisfied than before PLCs were implemented “because I have very little experience before PLCs were implemented”.

Ashley was professional and poised. She seemed to go along with professional learning communities and gave PLCs credit for improving her practices through support and opportunities to share. Ashley was one of the few teachers who had no experience of working in a school that did not have professional learning communities. To her, PLCs were just a part of the job, not a new initiative.

Even though she felt there were some positive points about professional learning communities, it was clear that the implementation of professional learning communities was an issue. Teams appeared to be separated and did not show the spirit of professional learning communities, that all students were everyone's concern. There seems to have been some competition among the teams. It is not clear if the competition was among grade levels or support staff since Ashley was an AIG teacher.

Profile # 5: Barbara Flood (Bragtown)

Barbara is a fifth grade teacher at Bragtown. She is a member of the school improvement team and leadership teams. She has been trained in literacy from Boston College at Leslie University in the area of literacy coach. Her classroom is a model literacy classroom in the district. She provided staff development for her school and other schools in the district.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Barbara was asked if she felt she had to give up some professional autonomy as a result of being in a PLC. She stated,

“No, but I also have an administration who I feel trusts my judgment. I feel that as long as you are making decisions based on what your students need and can provide a rationale for why you are teaching what you are teaching, it is okay to teach differently. It is important for administration and teachers to realize that every class is different and every teacher I different so it may not always look the same. However, teaching the same standards in every class is important.”

According to Barbara, the impact of PLCs on teachers is different:

“I feel the impact is different. As a veteran teacher who is teaching a grade that is departmentalized, I feel like most of the PLC meeting time is not an effective use of my time. However, because other teachers have been novice teaches, I have to be there for support. On the other hand, I see where it greatly benefits novice teachers.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Barbara was asked did she felt Professional learning communities were a change agent for negative attitudes she stated,

“It truly depends on the make-up of personalities”.

As far as changing Barbara’s professional practices she had this to say,

“I am a better teacher because I have grown into looking more at what my students need from what I needed to teach I am more thorough in my planning”.

Barbara realized that it is not about what she does but about what the students learn. Even if she taught her best lesson and the students did not learn anything and cannot apply what she has taught them, then her lesson was no good. She stated,

“A lesson is only as good as what the students learned.”

For this reason she did feel that she became a better teacher because she did not focus on what she did but what her students could do.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Barbara considered the most useful component of PLCs as,

“Modeling of how to teach certain standards, going over student work, developing a pacing calendar, developing projects, and creating long term and short term goals.”

When asked about the least useful component her response was,

“weekly planning which leads to having many, many, many, meetings. Plans can be amazing on paper but teachers need their planning time to prepare the materials or they are only amazing on paper and not in action. It is important to note that some teachers, such as myself, plan better at home and then bring the plans in for revision.

Not everyone is great at planning in 30-minute increments with many distractions.”

Retention

Barbara falls in the category of a stayer. She stated that the reason she stayed at Bragtown was,

“I enjoy the students that Bragtown serves. Also, I have been here long enough to feel like I am part of the community and have a positive relationship with many of our families. Also, my team and I have fun working together...even when it gets stressful.”

Even though Barbara enjoys her team she stated that she would not leave if team members left. She reiterated her love for the school and community for not leaving.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

When asked about her PLC, Barbara stated,

“I love my PLC. I feel like it is beneficial for the most part. It is not always wonderful.

When there have been members of the PLC who do not carry their share of the workload.

Meetings all the time increases teacher stress and burns us out. The nature of education today requires so much documentation that it is hard to keep up.”

Barbara did not know how to answer whether PLCs made her school a more engaging place; she responded,

“I don’t know the answer to that question. It really depends on what aspect of PLCs we are discussing. My administration has pushed me to be a better teacher because of high expectations for students and staff.”

Barbara could not say the PLC always made her feel happier or more professionally satisfied, but she did say,

“It is sometimes frustrating to feel like you are meeting just to meet when the to-do list is a mile long. However, I enjoy the PLCs when I feel like we are learning.”

Complementary and polite would describe Barbara. She admired her school administrators and gained confidence in her teaching skills from their trust in her judgment. She is appeared to want and need their approval. Even though she gave credit to her administrator for pushing her to become a better teacher she did not appear to feel that her PLC team had the same contribution.

She felt that most of the meetings were not an effective use of time. She felt more as a support system for new teachers and felt that they needed her to guide them in the right direction. It appeared that she saw herself in the role of a mentor not a team member. She did admit that professional learning communities helped her look at what her students’ needed and not at what she felt she needed to teach.

Profile #6: Morris Bowser (Bragtown)

Morris is a second grade teacher. He is on the school literacy team and an active member of the first grade PLC. He has been a teacher at Bragtown for ten years.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Autonomy is important to Morris. After teaching for ten years he has this to say when asked if he had to give up his autonomy.

“Somewhat. PLCs are powerful. This year, we are learning how to implement Common Core. Collaboration has caused us to look closely at our students academic classrooms. Since we meet every day, I feel that I would like to be able to take these plans back to my classroom and plan my individual lesson plans. Because of the many demands of meeting I feel PLC impacts everyone in one way or another. It may be time away from personal planning, getting ideas, or completing an assignment given by administration.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Changing negative attitudes into positive personalities is important to everyone invested in a school. “PLCs are effective in changing negative ideas due to collaboration of teachers, administrators, and staff. Setting norms and support of new teams also helps.

Morris explained that his professional practices had been changed in many ways: I have learned to look at the all the students not just mine. I get ideas from my team on how to address the needs of the students I serve. The focus is not on me and my

teaching but on what the students are getting from my lessons. It has caused me to be more open minded to what my students really need instead of what I want them to have.”

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Morris feels that,

“Having time to meet during school hours to look collectively at standards and coming up with a sketch of what the essential questions or learning strategies are for each lesson was a useful component of PLCs.”

The least useful component was when norms were not followed. He stated, “When we have sidebars and people not seeing the whole picture and unwillingness to try new ideas.”

Retention

When Morris was asked why he stayed at Bragtown, he replied,

“I have stayed at this school because I am invested in the students. I believe that each student is capable of learning with the right support in place. I have built positive relationships with my former and present parents. Many come back to say hello or request me as a teacher.”

Morris also said he would not leave if his team members left. He felt that he could work with anyone who had students’ best interest at heart. He also felt that if implemented correctly, PLCs would work even if the teachers were not close.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Morris had strong feelings about the PLC teams.

“We have a diverse team. Several of our members’ transitioned from the upper grades to second grade. I feel that the adjustment has gradually improved as we continue to focus on standards and best practices for children. We differ in many ways but we manage to come back together and share ideas and work load.”

Morris felt that PLCs had a double affect that they cause stress and increase teacher stress and burnout. He shared his thoughts on this area,

“I feel the amount of hours that we spend weekly seems to affect our own personal lives. We are losing quality teachers due to high stress level and the amount of work that we have to do over the weekends.”

Morris did not think PLCs made his school a more engaging place to work. However, he did share,

“I enjoy most of my team members and it is nice to share, but often we are given assignments that are not meaningful and do not meet what we feel are the needs of our students. We call this teacher busy work. It also seems that when you get to learn one team and start to understand how each person works we are moved to another grade level. Then you have to learn personalities all over again.”

A type A personality, Morris stuck to the facts. His answers focused on the purpose of professional learning communities, collaboration, setting norms, and coming up with essential questions. Time management was a big issue for Morris and had issues with staff that did not stay on task. It frustrated Morris when sidebar conversations kept team members from seeing the whole picture and when team members were not willing to be

innovative. I could tell that Morris was competitive and liked to think outside the box and was not stuck in the one shoe fit all style of education.

Profile # 7: Darren Bass (Mason)

Darren is an upper elementary teacher at Mason School. He has worked at Mason for six years. This is a second career for Darren. He also holds an Insurance Broker certification. Because Mason is a small school, Darren, like most teachers, has served on many committees including his PLC team. He has been school liaison for science and social studies and on the leadership team. He holds certifications in three states and is certified in elementary education and middle grade social studies, science, and language arts.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Darren was very vocal about his views on professional learning communities. He had a clear picture of what he thought they should and should not be. He also had a vision for what he felt his classroom needed and PLCs were not a part of his vision. When asked if professional autonomy was lost through PLCs he answered,

“I feel that my time is no longer my own. I no longer have enough time to plan; therefore I cannot be as prepared. I also have a co-educator that dominates the PLC and does not allow anyone else to have an opinion.”

Darren did not totally object to PLCs, only the amount of time spent in them. He felt teachers should come prepared with information in hand to each meeting. He also felt that the majority of the time should have been spent preparing, not planning. When asked if he felt all teachers were affected in the same way, he responded,

“I feel that new teachers might find it more helpful.” He went on to explain that all teachers new and old needed time to plan. He stated, “If you only prepared and did not plan the execution of the lessons would not be effective.”

Professional Learning Communities Agent of Change

It was clear that Darren did not see PLCs as an agent of change in a positive way. The only change that Darren could see was negative change. When he was asked how effective he believed PLCs were in changing negative attitudes he stated bluntly “not at all.” He was also asked if PLCs changed his professional practice, he stated,

“I feel I am becoming a less effective teacher due to PLCs.”

All Darren stated he wanted to do was to teach without added assignments, extra meetings, and lots of opinions. He felt he assessed his students and knew what they needed. Given quality time and adequate planning time he could deliver and be an effective teacher.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

When asked what were the most useful benefits of PLCs were Darren did not hesitate to say,

“I have not seen the benefits of working in a PLC, as opposed to a regular meeting.”

Darren admitted that his school was small and had few members on the PLC and that things may work differently in larger schools where more staff were involved. Because Darren did not feel PLCs were valuable at all his response to the least useful component of PLC was,

“I do not feel PLCs are productive.”

Retention

Darren had been at Mason school for six years. He had taught in other states and in other districts but stated he had stayed at Mason because,

“I have stayed at my school, because I like the families and students.”

The magnet focus and the culture of the school was a selling point for Darren. He knew that the students and parents that came to Mason wanted to be there because they applied in the lottery. The families had a true interest in their child’s education. For that reason he stated he would not leave if members of his PLC left the school.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

When Darren expressed his feelings about the members on his PLC team he stated,

“The people on our personal team do not want to contribute or be part of a team. We do not work together. Some members just want to push their personal agendas.”

He went on to say the PLC did not minimize stress and burnout,

“For me, PLCs increase my stress, because I am less prepared and sometimes not treated like a professional.”

Darren also did not feel that PLCs made his work place more engaging. He felt that the pressure to meet with his team made his work place less engaging. He stated he was not professionally satisfied working in PLCs since they had been implemented at his school. He concluded,

“Not at all, I am more frustrated.”

If the school district had a transfer list, I would not be surprised if I saw Darren's name at the top of the list. After the interview, Darren shared his accomplishments. A well decorated educator, it was clear that Darren had many degrees, licensures, certifications, and multiple trainings. You would think that someone with all that knowledge would be the ideal person for a professional learning community team. Of all the teachers interviewed, Darren was the least positive about professional learning communities. I was not sure if his frustration was with his team, with the process, or both. Whatever the cause, Darren was not shy about sharing his feelings and dislikes about professional learning communities.

Profile # 8: Kelley Hall (Mason)

Kelley came to Mason with over 20 years of teaching experience. She has been teaching now for 33 years. She is one of the primary teachers and has a birth to kindergarten license. She served on the site based committee and on the PLC team. She is certified in birth to kindergarten and holds a K-6 license.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

With 20 years of experience, Kelly was very familiar with the educational area before professional learning communities were established. When she started teaching, teachers were expected to go to their classrooms and figure issues out on their own. Teachers did not share ideas or work as a team. Your students were your responsibility. When asked if she felt she had to give up professional autonomy working in PLCs she stated,

“No, I do not feel that I have to give up some professional autonomy working in PLCs.”

She felt that PLCs have been good for her and helped her with new trends in education. She valued the information that new teachers brought to the table and felt respected for what she could share from her years of experience. She did not feel embarrassed or that the meetings were beneath her skill level. She stated,

“I feel that PLCs impact all teachers equally.”

Professional Learning as an Agent of Change

Kelly did not have a lot of negative attitudes on her team, but knew of teams who complained of negative attitudes. The attitudes had not been changed even with working in PLCs. She felt that changing negative attitudes was more of the administrators’ responsibility. She stated,

“I’m not sure at this time how effective PLCs are at changing negative attitudes. I do feel that PLCs are very helpful to newly hired teachers in that it gives them the support needed which should encourage them to remain at their site.”

Kelly had been teaching a long time. She had developed her open methods for best practices and what was needed to achieve high student growth. Kelley stated that,

“Working in PLCs has not changed my professional practices.” She felt that her years of experience made her professional practices better and did not attribute changes to implementation of or participation in PLCs. It had given her the opportunity to share practices that worked and practices that were not as effective.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

The most useful component of PLCs for Kelley was working with her team. She stated,

“I feel collaborative planning is the most useful component of PLCs.”

She felt the least useful component was coordinating:

“If I had to choose, I would say coordinating is the least useful component of PLCs.

If the PLC is a joint effort, all members would contribute to its coordination.”

Kelley had two concerns with the coordination. First, it was hard to coordinate AIG, EC, ESL, other support areas, and special area teachers. She felt that all teachers who worked with students need to be at the table discussing their needs. The second area was planning the agenda. She did not feel that topics were always discussion worthy.

Retention

Kelley is a stayer. She believes in her school’s magnet focus. She stated,

“I have stayed at Mason because I like the Montessori philosophy of teaching young children.”

She enjoyed the developmentally appropriate approach to teaching students how to explore new materials. She has had a significant amount of training in the teaching philosophy. Even though they have had several administrative changes and team members have left, Kelly stated she would not leave.

“No, I would not leave if members of my PLC left the school.”

She felt she had invested in the students and community and that she had a lot to

offer.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Kelly shared her perceptions of her PLC team:

“I feel that my PLC team is making progress. It is working better this year. The PLC concept was not embraced initially by all members of the team therefore we did not function as a unit.”

She did not feel that PLC assisted in retaining teachers. One reason was that PLC did not decrease the stress of teachers. She went on to say:

“With all the meetings, paper work, and weekly assignments, you don’t have time to work on what you need. Administrators and other school personnel are always sharing district updates and changes. By the time you get to the planning portion of the agenda the meeting is ending. PLCs should minimize teacher stress, but they don’t.”

Kelly was hopeful that in the future PLCs would make her school a more engaging place to work. She stated, “No not presently, maybe in the future,” when asked about whether participation in the professional learning community made her school a more engaging work place to work. She did note that they had recently had an administrative change and that change is sometimes difficulty. She stated,

“I am not happier or more professionally satisfied”
since PLCs were implemented at her school.

No stumbling, no searching for words, Kelly called a spade a spade. She did not try to hide the fact that her PLC team had problems working together. She did admit that things were getting better. She did not share what the specific problems were, but did mention that professional learning communities were not embraced by all team members and not all members contributed to the team planning. It was assumed that not all teachers pulled their weight. Even though it was not stated directly, there appeared to be a sense of competitiveness.

Profile # 9: Jessica Jordan (Mason)

Jessica had been a primary teacher at Mason for more than six years. She worked at a charter Montessori school in a neighboring district and had received training in the Montessori philosophy.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Jessica had previously worked at a charter school and had been Montessori trained. The philosophy promotes independent and inquiry based learning. Jessica enjoyed the Montessori philosophy so much that she searched public schools with that philosophy and was hired at Mason. At the charter school, teachers did not work in PLCs; they were only required to use the Montessori curriculum. When Jessica was asked whether she had to give up some professional autonomy she replied, “No, I don’t feel like we had to I feel like the PLC model for me includes everybody. We all come to some common ground and share ideas on the same topic.” Jessica did feel the impact of PLCs was different for teachers.

“it impacts them very differently. For new teachers it seems as a support; for veteran teachers it is intimidating.”

Jessica felt that veteran teachers were intimidated because it took them out of their comfort zone and into a culture that was very different. Teachers were often asked to share success and failures that otherwise would be kept a secret. Often, teachers were challenged to think outside the box and to deviate from the safe routines that many have developed through the years.

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Jessica shared an experience she had with PLC training at another school in the district. She had this to say about PLCs changing negative attitudes.

“If it is done about the right way it could change negative teaching. I went to training and saw a team from another school and that was a true example of a PLC. They had a good time talking, sharing, and talking about discipline. My team does not share.”

Her thoughts were if all the components of PLCs were implemented correctly and staff had time to share what was important then negative attitudes would not exist. She felt that PLCs had changed her practice by taking away her planning time. Before PLCs she had all her planning periods and time before and after school to plan her lessons. Now she felt that she spent time in meetings which would be beneficial if her team brought suggestions or activities to share. She felt they meet only to go back and work as individuals.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Jessica believed the most useful component of PLCs was building good relationships with colleagues. She felt her team had gotten closer but still did not function in the way a PLC should. After her training, she could see that many of the key items needed for a PLC were not utilized by her team. Jessica felt that many times they were “getting together just to say you are meeting.’

She did not feel that the meetings were productive or relevant. The agenda was provided for them and not one that the teachers created. She also felt the topics the team wanted to discuss were not included so many of the teachers did not put forth an effort to share or to bring best practices to the table. Many of the teachers, from her perspective, had given up on PLCs being a helpful agent to PLCs being another assignment or task.

Retention

Jessica explains her reason for staying at Mason,

“I came from a charter Montessori school in Wake County and was looking to do a regular traditional school. I had never heard of Montessori in a public school. I enjoyed the principal and the environment. It was different from the other public school. Mason did not have a lot of transition. Families are educated and most students come from two parent homes. They put their children first. There was not a lot of diversity. Then the leadership changed. Rules and guidelines for how you get in changed. The tuition charge for Pre-K changed to free Pre-K which brought more diversity. Curriculums have changed and we now have two curriculums to follow.

There are more budget cuts, but even with all of this I stay for the families and the program.”

When asked whether she would leave if members of her PLC team left the school, she replied,

“No, I would not leave if members of my PLC left, but I am leaving not because of them but the demands of PLC having so many meetings. I am a single parent and I need to be in an environment that I will plan and work together.”

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

Jessica liked working in professional learning communities and in PLC teams, but she valued her time and the quality of her work. She did not always feel that others had the same life challenges on their time or same level of expectations for their work. She stated,

“I like PLC I do believe it works but with three days planning time you have less time to plan. The lower grades plan by subject but our team has not gotten to that point yet. Some teaches do want to combine and plan for one another. I don’t want to share. I must be able to trust my teammates to allow them to plan for me.”

Jessica felt that her stress was increased due to the amount of planning time required. She stated,

“More stress because I have less planning time. If you are having productive meetings they can be effective.”

She did not feel at her level that the existence of PLCs made the school a more engaging place to work. She would also not leave if PLCs were eliminated from her school.

One of the few participants that called to talk before her interview was Jessica. Very articulate and well spoken, she discussed many of the changes that had taken place through her years at Mason. She loved the parent involvement and did not find it intrusive as some teachers did. The fact that parents wanted their students to learn and succeed was a plus. It was clear that she was concerned about some of the changes that had taken place over the years and not sure of the direction of the school.

Even though she felt she was a team player, some of her team members did not share the same feelings. She was willing to share the work load, but didn't fill all her team shared the same trust for their teammates. Reflecting on a professional learning community at another school it was clear that she felt she was missing something from her PLC team.

Profile # 10: Jennifer O'Neal (Mason)

Jennifer is a primary teacher with over 4 years of experience. She started her career as a teacher assistant and later received a birth to kindergarten license. She is active on her PLC team and involved in other school activities.

Affects of Professional Learning Communities on the Teaching Profession

Though Jennifer has not been a teacher long, she has been in the field of education and knows what works for her. When asked about losing her autonomy through PLCs she stated,

“I don't feel I did. I feel I can take what works for me and modify what doesn't. It's nice to hear ideas from others and share your own.”

She felt this way about the impact of PLCs,

“I think it is probably more beneficial for teachers with less classroom experience, because they have less knowledge than the veteran teachers and have more to learn. Of course, sometimes the new teachers bring things that they have learned that may not have been popular when the veteran teachers were in school, so it goes both ways.”

Professional Learning Communities as an Agent of Change

Jennifer also felt that PLCs were more effective in changing negative attitudes for new teachers. She stated,

“I think they are effective because newer teachers do not feel like they are doing it all alone.”

Jennifer’s perception was that new teachers may feel intimidated by veteran teachers and PLCs gave them a platform for their voice to be heard. It would also give them a way to ask questions and share ideas that they may not otherwise share. She stated that,

“it has helped me by allowing me to share ideas and hear others’ ideas on ways to teach. I think it has made me less stressed as well.”

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Jennifer talked about the component of PLCs that she felt was most useful,

“I think collaboration is the most useful component of PLC.”

Jennifer believed that if the PLC collaborated they could get more work done in a shorter amount of time. She also felt that collaboration would make better teachers because they could learn from one another. Teachers would be stronger and better prepared for their

students. The learning curve for new teachers would be shortened by PLCs. She did have some concerns about PLC. She felt that, “sometimes we are asked to do things as a PLC that I feel is like busy work; thing like unpacking standards that have already been unpacked by others.” She stated that teachers were often told this was to help them understand the concept of unpacking, but she felt they could learn that from unpacking standards that had not previously been done.

Retention

Jennifer like the other teachers at Mason stayed because,

“I like the small school atmosphere, and I enjoy using the Montessori Method of instruction.”

Jennifer stated that she knew the families and could call the students by name.

Often former students would come back to see her. For this reason she stated she would not leave if her team members left Mason.

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

When Jennifer was asked if she liked her PLC team and if she thought it was beneficial she responded,

“I feel like it works most of the time. There are times we have conflicts but we work through them.” Jennifer felt “PLCs minimized stress as long as we are allowed to have a part in deciding how PLC time is spent.”

When the time was spent accomplishing things that were worthwhile to the team,

Jennifer stated that everyone's stress was less. She also felt that the PLC made her work place more engaging. She felt like her team got to know each other and developed a relationship that made working at Mason more appealing. She stated

“I think PLCs make us more of a community.”

She stated that her previous school did not have the same feeling;

“There have been PLCs since I started at this school, but I do like it better than my previous school, where we had no PLC.”

Adapt not adopt, was the impression Jennifer gave of her involvement in professional learning communities. In order to feel that she was in control of her classroom she took away what worked from the meetings and modified to fit the needs of her students. She enjoyed hearing from her team but felt comfortable enough in her teaching ability to know what would work and what would not work in her class.

Jennifer liked working in professional learning communities better than working in isolation. She reflected on the school she was at before Mason that did not have professional learning communities. That was one of the things she liked about Mason but did not think that her PLC would be the reason she stayed.

Comparison of the Profiles

After analyzing each profile in the case study, a comparison was made of the two schools. The participants in the study from Bragtown Elementary School shared many of the same concerns as Mason Elementary School in the area of professional practices. The similarities between the two schools were that the majority of the participants did not fill that

they had to give up their professional autonomy. They were career teachers and felt comfortable in who they were and their teaching styles. They could attend meetings and go back to their classes and do what they felt best for their students. They felt that their presents benefited novice teachers more than career teachers.

Both schools felt that there were too many meetings. Because many of the meetings were held before and after school, much of their personal planning time was taken. Teachers felt they had to choose between personal time and not being as prepared to teach. Many of the meetings were not productive and agenda items did not help them in their classroom.

Many teachers also felt that professional learning communities were more beneficial for new teachers. New teachers could learn from their experience. They could share teaching strategies and things that work. Many of the teachers knew what skills and strategies were harder for students and what pre-teaching needed to be done. Career teachers also shared materials with new teachers who had not build up a professional collection.

The participants at both schools had similar reasons for staying at their current schools. Many teacher expressed loyalty to their students, proximity to their homes, and the school magnet program. The participants also stated they would not leave if their colleges left the school and they would not leave if professional learning communities were eliminated.

There were no overwhelming differences between the two schools. Both schools appeared to have similar concerns. Concerns are further addressed in the summary of question 1 and the summary of question 2.

Summary of Interview Responses to Research Question #1

Interview results for the affects of professional learning communities on the teacher profession practices showed that most teachers felt professional learning communities were helpful only if professional learning communities were implemented with structure, guidelines, and expectations. Teachers at both schools felt that proper implementation was lacking and that personal planning time suffered due to time spent at professional learning community meetings. For this reason, most teachers did not feel the professional learning communities had a completely positive benefit on their professional practices.

The majority of the teachers at school Bragtown did not feel that they had to give up professional autonomy working in PLCs. At Mason, only one teacher felt that decisions were no longer the teachers' choice and felt autonomy was threatened by implementation of professional learning communities. Another common theme was that new teachers gained more from the meetings than veteran teachers. The perception was that new teachers needed the guidance and the extra time to plan and be given feedback. Though the teachers interviewed did comment that new teachers shared new ideas and techniques, they did not feel that they needed the meetings as much as novice teachers.

Bragtown and Mason had very different views of the affects of professional learning communities on changing negative attitudes. Teachers at school Bragtown felt that a strong professional learning community could change negative attitudes and help newly hired teachers with teaching at the school. Through collaboration, setting norms, and supportive teams, teachers felt cliques and negative attitudes would be "squashed". The responses at

Mason were split. Only one teacher felt PLCs changed negative attitudes. The other teachers responded not sure, not at all, and only if implemented correctly.

Many of the participants mentioned that their professional practices were affected by the amount of time they had to meet. Personal planning time had to be sacrificed to accommodate the professional planning time. A common theme was that meetings take too much time and often are not as beneficial as they could be. Feedback and sharing ideas was a positive for both schools. More meaningful tasks and tasks that directly benefited their job performance would also make professional learning communities more beneficial to all teachers. Most teachers felt that when meetings were planned and organized that the time they spent was worthwhile. The number of meetings was also a concern for all teachers. Comparisons of PLCs at Bragtown were a concern. Though teachers agreed that some PLCs did not function as well as they should, the consensus was that the dysfunction should be addressed in private.

Summary of Interview Responses to Research Question #2

Interview results indicated that overall teachers do not believe that professional learning communities affect teacher retention. The majority of the teachers felt the effects were insignificant for teachers remaining at their current school. Many teachers stayed at the school because of the students and families they served. They felt comfortable in the community they worked in and had been at the same school for a while. Others stayed at their school because of the proximity to their homes. Another common theme for Mason Elementary School was the magnet focus. Even though Mason has low turnover, the

teachers do not attribute the low turnover to professional learning communities but to the students, parents, community, and school's magnet status. Many teachers felt strongly in the teaching philosophy of the school. None of the teachers stated that professional learning communities were the reason they stayed at their school. Teachers at Bragtown (the school with high teacher turnover) did not feel that professional learning communities helped retain teachers. In fact, administrators, fewer meetings, and less paperwork were noted as motivators to retain teachers.

The majority of the teachers enjoy working with their professional learning communities teams, although many teachers admitted it was sometimes a challenge working collaboratively with a group of people. There were concerns among some participants of hidden agendas, all members not carrying their share of the workload, and some team members not embracing the PLC concept.

Though many of the teachers enjoyed their professional learning community peers, none of the participants stated they would leave if members of their PLC left the school. Some teachers did state they would leave due to the demanding workload. Others stated they would leave if the district had a transfer policy. Another participant stated if they ever leave, their PLC would not be the reason.

Teacher stress and burnout was stated to be due to professional learning communities not working together and by having too many meetings. Having less time to plan and prepare for their classes due to meetings increased stress. Administrators having more realistic expectations and less paperwork would help decrease burnout.

Elimination of professional learning communities would not be a reason for the participants to seek transfer to another school that has professional learning communities. Only one participant replied that she would transfer to another school if the PLC at her school was discontinued. The overwhelming majority of teachers stated PLCs had no impact on their decision to remain in teaching; in fact, evidence suggests that dysfunctional PLCs may negatively impact teacher retention.

The majority of the teachers stated that professional learning communities did not make the school a more engaging place to work. It also did not affect their professional happiness or job satisfaction.

CHAPTER V DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities in two elementary schools. The data gathered was from teachers who are members of actual professional learning communities and participate in professional learning community meetings. Because professional learning communities are so widely used in many school districts, the implications of this study are crucial to help school leaders understand teachers' perceptions. This study is also essential for administrators as they continue to work with teachers in professional learning communities to improve teacher retention.

Interpretation of the Research Findings

For this study two research questions were asked, how do professional learning communities affect teachers' professional practices and the impact of professional learning communities on teachers' retention? The research showed that teachers believed that professional learning communities only affected teacher professional practices when professional learning communities were implemented with specific instructions and goals were established and monitored. They did not feel that professional learning communities had an impact on teacher retention. The literature review in Chapter II helped guide the development of the research questions and provided a more thorough understanding of professional learning communities. However, very little research is focused on teachers' perceptions of professional practices and retention. Five primary themes were identified in this study and perceived to be important by the participants in the study; they were: affects of

professional learning communities on the teaching profession, professional learning communities as an agent of change, components of professional learning communities, retention, and perceptions of professional learning communities.

In the California mentor teacher study (Brown & Wambach, 1987), retention, one of the five themes used in this study, was discussed. The data provided used a mentoring program to increase teacher retention. Teachers were matched by grade level and curricular subjects. The study only looked at first year teachers and only identified a slight positive affect of professional learning communities in increasing teacher retention. The study did not address how teachers felt or why they felt there was only a slight increase in retention. For that reason the retention could have been by coincidence. In this study, teachers stated that they stayed at their school because they liked the community and families, and the fact the school was close to their homes. This finding is consistent with that found in the present study.

The Toronto Teacher Peer Support Study (Cheng & Brown, 1992) paired novice teachers with veteran teachers. This is similar to the professional learning community process in that teachers were paired by grade level or subject matter. The common theme for both this study and the Toronto Teacher Peer Support Study is that the peer support groups and professional learning communities act as an agent of change. The Peer Support Study was an agent used to change retention by having teachers work with peers. The Peer Support Study had a control group that was not paired with a veteran teacher. The data consistently showed a higher increase in retention in the study group verses the control group that was not paired.

There again, no data was included as to the perception of the participants in the group explaining what specifically made them stay.

(Jamie Eson-Brizo's 2010) dissertation looks at turnover in special education. She compared a regular education class to a special education autism class. The turnover was twice as high in the autism class compared to the regular education class. Eson-Brizo did address the reasons for leaving as poor salaries, dissatisfaction with career or school, and poor administrative support. The program looked at teacher attitudes before and after the implementation of the mentoring program. The attitudes of the teachers are in line with this study's theme, perceptions. After the program, teachers stated they were happy with the job and would stay because of hiring freezes and staff cuts. The difference in this program and professional learning communities is that the program was for a short period of time. Professional learning communities are ongoing. The benefits or lack thereof can be measured for years. Also, all of the teachers in this study had longevity and could provide reasons for why they stayed. Being that the majority of teachers leave in the first five years, it would be of great value to see if the Eson-Brizo program provided any long term benefits to retention.

An interpersonal relationship between teachers was the focus of Julene Bassett's (2009) dissertation. Bassett's dissertation looks at the moral obligation of teachers to support one another through professional learning communities. One of the themes of this study, the effects of professional learning communities, was explored through the relationship of Adam and Eve. Through the story of Adam and Eve, Bassett focused on diversity, unity, and work.

She stated that it was not good for teachers to work alone. Although she linked her research to a thousand year old story, she failed to explain how professional learning communities affect teachers' professional practices by working together. Nor was it clear what teachers felt about working together or in isolation. This study asks teachers how they feel about working together or alone. Teachers were able to give reasons for the approach they feel fits them best. The connection between this study and Bassett's (2009) study is that both studies seek to find out teachers perception of professional learning communities. Bassett does not look at retention of teachers in the study.

Implementation is a key component to the success of any program. Angela Besendorfor (2008) looks at acceptance as an important part of implementation. Components of professional learning communities were a theme addressed in this study that is shared with Besendorfor's (2008) study analyzing implementation. Besendorfor's study took place in a rural school district with elementary, middle, and high schools teachers. The implementation of professional learning communities was the focus of the study. A consultant group assisted with the training and teachers were given release time in the morning. This study is different from the current study because it includes administrators and the central office. The study did take notice of teacher buy-in but did not get teachers' perceptions as to why some teacher bought into professional learning communities and some did not. This study understands the importance of implementation, thus only veteran teachers who had been trained at the district level were used. However, implementation without buy-in does not equal a successful program. The only way to know if teachers truly buy into professional learning communities

is by asking them how they feel. In this study, student growth was also a component for choosing the sample schools. Both schools had high student growth. It is not known if the schools in Besendofor's study had high or low student growth which may have played a part in teacher buy-in.

Nolan in 2009 examined teacher efficacy by studying ten Louisiana public schools. The Louisiana 9th Grade Redesign Initiative explores interrelationships by focusing on the degree to which professional learning communities exist as the primary organizational structure and to determine the degree to which professional learning communities impact teacher self efficacy. Efficacy is the belief in which one feels they can effect change. Nolan used a quantitative method and determined that teachers had an moderate to strong self-efficacy belief. Perception was a mutual theme in this study and the Louisiana 9th Grade Redesign Initiative. However, Nolan did not look at self-efficacy affecting teacher retention. Also this study was a quantitative study which does not provide the best data for teacher perception.

Recommendations for Future Research

After completing the interviews and analyzing the data, the following three suggestions are made for future research. The three focus areas are implementation, administrations' perceptions of professional learning communities, and time management and scheduling of professional learning communities.

Implementation is a very important part of starting any program. It is important that all teachers on a PLC team have the same level of training and that refresher courses are

provided for continuing staff. Proper implementation sets the framework and provides expectations for the team. The following studies in this area are recommended:

1. A comparison of two districts that implement professional learning communities, one which provides a detailed staff development process and one that allows implementation to be school-based.
2. Teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities before implementation of a PLC program and after. What differences, if any, exist?
3. What are the benefits to having a structured PLC process? Does this increase teacher satisfaction and retention?

Administrators generally set the tone for most schools. It is important to see their perception of professional learning communities. Programs that administrators deem important are generally important to the staff at the school. These programs are monitored at a close rate and receive attention for positive and negative performances. Suggestions for study are:

1. A comparison of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities. What are the similarities and what are the differences?
2. How do administrators monitor the professional learning communities at their school? What metrics or instruments are used to show that a team has been successful?
3. What training, if any, have administrators had in professional learning communities? Would they consider themselves superior, adequate, or below

standard for understanding the professional learning community process?

Why?

Too many meetings after school is a constant complaint from teachers. The last area would look at various ways that schools and school districts plan and schedule time for teachers to meet in professional learning communities.

1. Teachers' perception on the amount of time spent in professional learning communities and the perceived value in terms of benefits to student growth.
2. Are there benefits for teachers to have early release days for professional learning communities?

Implications for Practice

By gathering teachers' perceptions, this study contributed to previous research on professional learning communities. By looking at the practices that teachers find most beneficial and least useful administrators are able to find ways to increase positive beliefs about professional learning communities and its effects on professional practices. The research indicates that teachers feel that too many meetings cause teacher burnout and increase stress. Teachers were also concerned that many meetings were not necessary. Teachers would also like to be able to have meetings without administrators dictating the agenda. Allowing teachers to discuss topics that they feel are relevant to their practices was also a common theme.

The district and school must be committed to going deeper than surface level knowledge and be committed to holding all parties accountable. It is important for districts to develop a

plan for implementing professional learning communities. The plan should include the following areas of staff development: knowledge of professional learning communities, process and function, implementation, documentation, and scheduling and monitoring.

Staff development on what professional learning communities are and are not should be held for all new staff. Returning staff to the district should receive modified staff development on key concepts. Administrators and central office staff would receive training on how to build empowerment through professional learning communities and how to work with dysfunctional teams. This would be a part of the knowledge component of the plan.

How professional learning communities should run would be process and function. Guidelines for implementation would include norms for meetings and student or grade level goal setting. Systems for keeping teachers on track would be addressed in this section. Agendas would be required ahead of time. Teachers would be given the opportunity to submit agenda items to administration so that teachers' areas of concerns would be addressed. This would also keep one person or group from dominating the meeting. Documenting student data and behavioral outcomes would fall under documentation. Also in this section, teachers would be trained on how to disaggregate data. Student growth would be monitored. Tracking sheets, interventions, and personal education plans would be addressed in this section. This step would provide clarity and allow teachers to see how professional learning communities may affect their professional practices.

Though teachers generally felt that professional learning communities were beneficial, at least for novice teachers, a major concern was the amount of time spent at meetings held

after school. Schmaker (1996) recommends release time for teachers during the school day for them to meet. By building professional learning community time into the daily schedule, teachers would have personal planning time after school. DuFour and Eaker (1998) state, “Concepts are great, but at some point most of us need practical suggestions on applying those concepts to our current situations” (p. 16). Time for meeting, individual planning and administrative monitoring would be the last category, under scheduling and monitoring. This would address the problem of meeting too much, along with a daily schedule allowing teachers to plan during the school day. This could be done by aligning specials or hiring subs. It would also assist in eliminating the stress of multiple meetings and would create a collaborative environment among teachers. Districts should allow early release days to be centered on professional learning communities at schools.

Implications for Leadership Practices

For readers that may still be skeptical of professional learning communities having any benefits to teacher professional practices and teacher retention, here are a few take-a-ways that the researcher felt beneficial after completion of the study and implemented the following school year. Make sure you understand professional learning communities and how they work. It is important that the administrator takes the lead and is confident in guiding the school through professional learning community process. This includes knowing how to work with teams that may be dysfunctional.

Take the time early in the year to make sure that everyone understands the purpose of professional learning communities and that the structure is consistent through-out the

building. Provide whole school training. This can be done by the administrative team or an outside consultant. Don't assume everyone knows and understands professional learning community or that team members will bridge the gap. Discuss each part of the professional learning community process and its importance. Schools may be anxious to start professional learning community, but laying the ground work and having everyone on the same page will result in more productive meetings that take less time. Thus addressing teachers concern of having too many meeting that last too long.

Once the structure and purpose of the meetings are established each team needs to set up norms for the grade level and go over the norms at every meeting. Each member had to contribute one norm, usually their pet peeve, to the list of norms. Three roles for team members were established; time keeper, recorder, and facilitator (usually the grade level chair). A detail description of the roles where given to each team and modeled for better understanding. The time keeper kept teachers and support staff on topic and diverted any potential grip sessions by redirecting the meeting back to the agenda topic. The record keeper fills out the joint sections of the lesson plan template and takes notes of any take-away items that the staff may be responsible for completing. The facilitator leads the meeting, ensures that everyone has a chance to participate in the discussion, and makes sure that all agenda items are addressed.

Because everyone at the school had been trained in the professional learning community process principals can feel less obligated to attend every meeting. When administration attends meetings less talking is done by the administration team since district updates are

given in newsletters. Agendas were developed to include all components of professional learning communities but teachers fill out the agendas with what is most important to the grade level (see Appendix E).

Most importantly, the researcher asked teachers about the structure of professional learning communities at the school. Teacher shared that support team members such as English as a Second Language teachers, Exceptional Children, and Academically and Intellectually Gifted teachers were needed at the meetings to help plan for the students they serve. Schedules were created to allow common planning time so that teachers could attend meeting with grade level teachers. One staff meeting a month was devoted to cross grade level planning. The office staff was used to transport students to and from specials to allow more planning time for teachers.

By asking teachers what they needed from professional learning communities, teachers are submitting better developed lesson plans with integrated lesson plans from the support area teachers, common assessments are more relevant to the common core curriculum, and student centers are more rigorous and relevant. Consistency in instructional presentations is seen across grade levels and co-teaching for more demanding standards is taking place. Resources are better utilized and students are receiving more developed professional education plans with goals that are documented.

Conclusion

With the increase of teachers leaving the field of education, retention of highly qualified teachers is important to the teaching profession. The only way a strong

professional educational pool can be created is by retaining highly qualified teachers. Thus, the basis of this study looks at teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities on teacher professional practices and retention. Findings in this study suggest that professional learning communities only affect teachers' professional practices when professional learning communities were implemented with specific guidelines and when those guidelines were monitored. The benefits of PLCs were thought to be more relevant to novice than veteran teachers. The participants did not feel that professional learning communities increased teacher retention. Participants admitted to staying or leaving their schools for other reasons such as location of the school in proximity to where they live, the community, and the families at the school.

The implementation of a systematic professional learning community program may address some of the issues in the study such as too many meetings, team members off topic, and activities that do not seem beneficial to teachers. Giving teachers the opportunity to work on information that seems relevant to what they do in the classroom and time to implement their plans were other key findings of the study.

School and school systems should have a way to celebrate successful professional learning communities that does not point fingers at dysfunctional professional learning communities. However, the study did show that even teachers in functional professional learning communities did not remain at their school due to professional learning communities. Participants expressed that their desire to leave or stay was not affected by professional learning communities.

The literature in this study showed how when programs are implemented with guidelines and monitored, teacher retention did increase. Adult learning theory also applied in this study. Teachers will work together when the work is meaningful and beneficial. The research shows that most teachers felt professional learning communities were helpful only if professional learning communities were implemented with structure, guidelines, and clear expectations. They did not feel that professional learning communities affected their teacher practices considerably. Furthermore, research from this study indicated that overall teachers do not believe that professional learning communities affect teacher retention.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

The interview will begin with an introduction. “Hello my name is Tekeisha and I will be conducting an interview of the effects of professional learning communities on teacher retention and teachers’ professional practices.” I would like to ask you questions to acquire your perceptions of how professional learning communities affect teacher retention and your professional practices, if at all. Your name will not be recorded or used nor will any factors that could identify you. You will be assigned a pseudonym for the study. The interview should take 45 minutes to an hour. Do you have any questions about the interview or its purpose? May I continue? Please sign this form giving your consent.

1. Do you feel that you have had to give up some professional autonomy working in PLCs; if so how do you feel about having to do that?
2. Why have you stayed at school (Bragtown, Mason)?
3. How do you feel about your PLC team? Do you feel that it works and is beneficial or do you feel it causes conflicts and problems?
4. Would you leave if members of your PLC left the school?
5. Do you feel that PLCs impact all teachers equally or does it impact ILTs, lateral entry, novice, and veteran teacher differently?
6. How effective do you feel PLCs are in changing negative attitudes and in helping newly hired teachers to continue teaching at the school?
7. What do you feel is the most useful component of PLCs?
8. What do you feel is the least useful component of PLCs?
9. Do PLCs minimize or increase teacher stress and burnout?
10. If PLCs were eliminated at your school, would you seek to transfer to another school that has a PLC?
11. Does the existence of a PLC at your school make the school a more engaging place to work?

12. Are you happier or more professionally satisfied working in a PLC than before PLCs were implemented in your school?
13. In what ways, if any, has working in a PLC affected or changed your professional practice?

APPENDIX B

National Teacher Turnover Statistics

Number of 2008–09 public school teachers who did not teach in the same school the following school year, by turnover category and reason for leaving.

Teacher or school characteristic in base year	Stayers	Movers	Leavers
Total	84.5	7.6	8.0
Teaching experience			
1–3 years	76.2	14.1	9.7
4–9 years	83.4	8.6	7.9
10–19 years	90.4	5.2	4.4
20 years or more	84.0	5.2	10.8

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public School Teacher Data Files 2007-08; Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), Current Data Files”, 2008-09.

APPENDIX C

Sample Gatekeeper Letter

Department of Research and Accountability
Dawson Public Schools
Dawson, North Carolina

November 21, 2012

Dear Ms. PLC School District:

I am currently conducting research on teacher perception of the influence of professional learning communities on teacher retention and on their professional practices. I am writing to request your permission to interview ten teachers four at School M and six at school B. As a doctorate degree candidate at North Carolina State University, this will satisfy requirements for my dissertation. The study will take place after school hours and would consist of ten forty-five minute interviews of certified teaching staff.

The information will be shared with all persons involved and can be used to plan more effective staff development for professional learning communities.

Sincerely,

Tekeisha F. Mitchell
Doctorate Student
North Carolina State University

APPENDIX D

Sample Cover Letter

November 21, 2012

Dear Teacher of School Bragtown or Mason

I am currently conducting research on teacher perception of the influence of the professional learning communities on teacher retention and on their professional practices. I am writing to request an interview with you on this topic. As a doctorate degree candidate at North Carolina State University, this will satisfy requirements for my dissertation. The 9 question interview will asks teachers their perception on professional learning communities and the influence they feel it has on professional practices. The information will be shared with all persons involved. Please contact me at (919)768-4829 or you can email me at tford_3673@hotmail.com.

Yours truly,

Tekeisha F. Mitchell
Doctorate Student
North Carolina State University

APPENDIX E

Agenda Template

Grade Level: _____

Date: _____

PYP theme for the current unit is: Cooperation & Creativity

Agenda Item	Lead	Time	Written Materials
I. Purpose of meeting a. Review Norms b. Assign/review roles	Chair	30 seconds	Focus of meeting Norms Roles for team members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda & time • Secretary • Lesson plan entry into electronic template
II. Review a. Common assessment data <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What worked? 2. What are students struggling with? b. Necessary corrective instruction c. Review centers needed	All	10 minutes	Copies of common assessments Uploaded data from Faculty Share
III. Students in need a. Interventions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ESL 2. Push-ins 3. Dodson/Bynum b. PEP/SAP/FBA <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students 2. Where in the process? c. Double Dose	All; Kimberly Johnson (SBST); Interventionists at 3 rd PLC	15 minutes	Intervention schedules PEPs SAP documentation FBAs IEPs
IV. Planning Tuesday: Reading/Writing/Social Studies Wednesday: Math/Science a. Standards to be taught b. Overview <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Essential Questions 2. I Can statements 3. Key Vocabulary c. Co-teaching: other instruction that happens in your classroom & when	All; 1 team member assigned to enter into electronic lesson plan	30 minutes	Standards: Common Core &/or Essential Standards DPS Curriculum Overviews DPS Unit Plans Burton Lesson Plan template (electronic version) Common assessments

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Lesson planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement strategies 2. Materials necessary 3. Independent practice & product e. Plan assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formative assessments 2. Create common assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reading b. Math c. Science f. Centers 			
V. Homework for next PLC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. b. 	Chair	5 minutes	
VI. Adjourn <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Copies to be made b. Lesson plans to be completed c. Minutes shared & uploaded 	Chair; Secretary		Common assessments to front office by Wednesday