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Refining Effective Instructional Strategies through Professional Learning Communities

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Refining Effective Instructional Strategies through Professional Learning Communities

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in middle schools. Utilizing data from student assessment, comparison of teams in this middle school was conducted to determine practices and conversations that have an impact on teachers' decisions about student learning. Understanding phenomenon that drives effective decision-making processes in teams of teachers creates an environment where shared leadership produces professional learning communities that are sustainable and systemic.

A qualitative approach was conducted in the form of a case study to capture themes relevant to teachers' thoughts about effective and ineffective team experiences. Using interviews, focus groups, and observations, themes were compared through open-coding and gathering of team minutes/notes. Triangulation of these data revealed themes relevant to creating effective teams by focusing on; curriculum, team dynamics, leadership, professional development, and personal influences that effected teachers. These themes were found to be the most impactful elements when designing and sustaining professional learning communities in this middle school setting.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family. To my wife, Shanda, whose love and support has been by my side through long nights of writing and research. To my father, who has been an example of strength and integrity. To my mother, who spent many hours in teacher conferences throughout my childhood defending the potential that only she could see in me. To my children, that inspire me to be my best as a father. Lastly, I dedicate this study to my grandparents for their faith and prayers that helped me to be the person I know would make them proud.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities (PLC) by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. According to DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many (2004), professional learning communities, “offer the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools” (p.2) to meet the challenges that educators face when making high-impact decisions about student learning and instruction. The development of effective collaborative teams is essential to meeting the needs of all children. According to Hirsh (2018), these learning structures are the most important opportunity we have for fulfilling a vision of excellent teaching and learning for every student every day (p. 8). It is my belief through collaborative processes within professional learning communities, teams can provide recommendations for academic improvement that are consistent and systematic. This study sought to gain insight that will inform decision-making processes that PLCs need to exhibit about instruction and intervention strategies in the context of this specific school site. As such, I hope to provide support to enhance the effectiveness of professional learning communities.

Problem Statement

At present, our district leadership has instituted the practice of professional learning communities within each school building and is focused on driving achievement and learning within the various subjects. While the focus on learning has utilized student assessment data to drive instructional practices, efforts within professional learning communities continue to reflect an imbalance of achievement results as evidenced in formal and informal assessments. The

problem of practice found within these communities reflects inconsistency of effective decisions that affect team dynamics and processes.

Based upon assessment data, intervention strategies show varied results when considering the diverse learning needs of the children. Targeted Achievement Gap Group (TAGG) children continue to show little to no improvement in reaching growth expectations based upon the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Plan. According to this plan, “Fair, flexible, and focused accountability and support systems are critical to continuously improving the academic achievement of all students, closing persistent achievement gaps, and improving equity” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2012). These support systems continue to be inconsistent and sporadic causing intervention strategies to have little or no effect.

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

Within professional learning communities, instruction is designed to address the individual needs of students through differentiating instruction, interventions to meet each need, and assessment of learning that is formative and summative in nature. Provini (2012) explains:

A professional learning community involves much more than a staff meeting or group of teachers getting together to discuss a book they have read. Instead, a professional learning community represents the institutionalization of a focus on continuous improvement in staff performance as well as student learning (para. 3).

Professional learning communities have incorporated processes designed to focus on student achievement and learning. However, processes within these various communities continue to yield both positive and negative outcomes.

Presently, practices within these professional learning communities have yielded inconsistent results based upon student achievement. While the reconfiguration of professional learning communities by administrators was necessary to accommodate scheduling changes, some teams have remained intact due to no change in schedule to that grade level. Consequently,

the most impact upon student achievement has been from the consistent practices of those teams with the least amount of change.

Is Directly Observable

Formative assessments guide discussion and recommendations within the professional learning communities. These include informal questioning and formal assessments that reflect learning of the topics or content objective. Discussions of these assessments should consistently be directed at higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy, and expectations should include what steps are taken when students fail to meet these expectations. Minutes and conversations, within professional learning communities, reflect that researched-based instruction and assessments are focused consistently upon the following components:

1. Communicating with students.
2. Using questioning and discussion techniques.
3. Engaging students in learning.
4. Using assessment in instruction.
5. Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness. (Danielson, 2007)

Based upon observations of team meetings and classrooms instruction, evidence shows that some professional learning communities are effectively incorporating these components while others are inconsistently using these strategies within lessons and interventions. Additionally, documentation provided by the PLC agendas and minutes supports the researcher's observations.

Is Actionable

Professional learning communities that have been most effective in this middle school have taken deliberate actions to address the specific learning needs of children based upon evidence gathered from team minutes and subsequent instructional strategies and interventions.

According to a recent study Dockery (2018) found, through professional collaboration, a system connects individual members in ways more likely to lead to mutually agreed-upon and consistently implemented decisions, thus connecting disparate parts of the organization (p.25). Discussions within professional learning communities have had a direct impact upon instructional practices and student learning based upon formal and informal assessment data. John Dewey (1916) asserts that, “specific elements of an individual’s method or way of attack upon a problem (learning) are found ultimately in his native tendencies and his acquired habits and interests” (pg. 173).

Addressing the diverse learning styles and cultural influences through reflective discussions has informed professional learning communities in this middle school about instructional strategies that make a difference in student tests scores. In a study conducted by Sheila Honeycut (2014), there is a strong need to train teachers to adapt instruction to the diverse student abilities, learning styles, personality traits and needs, by using differentiated teaching strategies (p.88). There are currently effective decision processes that have add a positive impact upon student learning in some of our grade level PLC’s. These research-based processes are presently lacking the same positive effect in other grades. Guidance for instruction that follows researched-based processes is outlined by Marzano and Waters (2009):

1. Systematically explore and examine instructional strategies.
2. Design a model or language for instruction.
3. Have teachers interact about the model or language of instruction.
4. Have teachers observe master teachers (and each other) using the model of instruction.
5. Monitor the effectiveness of individual teaching styles.

Marzano and Waters paint a clear picture of what effective teaching models should depict. DuFour (2004) specifies that:

...exploration of three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (p. 6-11)

Connects to Broader Strategy of Improvement

Indicators within the improvement plan are designed to connect improvement within strategies and processes discussed in our professional learning communities. Connecting these strategies and processes with contextual professional development is needed to provide an organized and sustainable process for improvement of instruction. Professional learning communities are comprised of members who are also on the school improvement team.

Through this study, guidance was given to those PLC's in other grade levels. Identifying those research-based strategies being utilized effectively in productive PLC's, the researcher was able to recommend processes to other grade levels that are currently struggling. There are six areas of focus within PLCs: focus on learning, collaborative cultures, collective inquiry, action oriented, commitment to continuous improvement, and results oriented. A closer study of specific characteristics of PLCs is necessary to promote forward movement and growth in this middle school setting.

DuFour et al., (2004) state that, "people who engage in collaborative team learning are able to learn from one another and thus create momentum to fuel continued improvement" (pg. 3). Building strong teams is essential for the success of creating an educational environment that provides continued improvement for students. A foundation of involvement throughout our PLC's is established within our district leadership teams that provide guidance and efforts to

make continuous improvement academically, and advises district personnel on changes to our Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (ACSIP).

Is High Leverage

Presently, our data reflects sufficient growth of our combined population meeting Average Yearly Progress (AYP), as specified by the state, in all tested areas. There continues to be an unacceptable disparity between our sub-groups, leaving the district in school improvement and most recently identified as a focus school. This disparity has created a gap between the academic success of our general population of students and TAGG groups which show little improvement overall. Intervention strategies to close this gap need to be designed with formative assessment to monitor success.

To address the needs of all children, differences have to be addressed to include meaningful conversations within all of our professional learning communities, as well as provide measures that are quantifiable and effective. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) summarizes this in a report commissioned by Congress stating; “We should expect a continuous improvement model in which schools, districts and states evaluate performance over time—retaining programs and policies that are shown to be effective in bringing about equity and excellence and discarding those that do not” (p.37). Developing professional learning communities that have effective support and informative strategies will enlighten practitioners while building leadership capacity in challenging educational environments. This study is designed to compare strategies used in professional learning communities through qualitative methods to identify categorical themes prevalent in high and low performing teams.

Research Questions

Currently, processes from some PLC s are having positive results in student learning while others still struggle to have consistent positive results. The goal of this study is to determine a means whereby teachers within this middle school can utilize information to inform professional learning community practices. Data gathered from this study will provide guidance and support within this school that is consistent with the practices and highly effective. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher's perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

Overview of Methodology

To develop a deeper understanding of effective PLC's, a qualitative approach is needed to understand the deeper contextual influences in this school. By utilizing a case study approach, a deeper understanding of teachers' personal experiences within professional learning communities provided the researcher processes that teachers found effective to inform pedagogical and instructional practices. Findings were analyzed to compare effective strategies to those efforts with little impact on student achievement.

Through the use of interviews, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions and overarching themes through coding data and making comparisons. Observations were conducted of professional learning community processes and instructional practices. Interviews were conducted with a total of 10 teachers from each existing team in grades six

through eight. Through this process the researcher was able to gather perceptual data relevant to effective professional learning community processes.

Positionality

Throne (2013) defines positionality as the ethical neutrality that must be adopted and embraced so the work remains objective and contributory to other related research. For the purpose of this study, positionality is seen as the two distinct roles that the researcher has as a practitioner-scholar. The ethical role of maintaining this neutrality as an objective observer, and the ethical obligation to effectively create change in instructional practices.

As a scholar, the researcher collected data as an outsider in order to limit subjectivity due to biases that could influence input from participants. Based upon previous experience, providing information without such bias allows an organization and team to be able to make decisions that are in the best interest of all stakeholders. It is important to realize that this neutrality is vital when relating the validity of data in this research. Clearly informing participants of my role allowed freedom of input without fear of repercussion from leadership.

As a practitioner, the researcher has an ethical obligation to the profession. Providing guidance in instructional practices which will lead to the equitable learning of all children guided the efforts of this study. Keeping this principle at the forefront of efforts and decisions made by professional learning communities is in keeping with the *signature pedagogies* of the EdD programs that support this action research.

Researcher's Role

As an educator, my role as an instructional leader began in the general classroom, as a teacher. I began teaching Special Education in the fall of 1998 and transitioned shortly thereafter at the request of my building administrator. Noticing the disparity of growth in children with

special needs, I began to notice the impact of leadership upon addressing these issues. I subsequently enrolled in an Administrator Leadership program in pursuit of my building administrator's license. In this capacity, I have been able to address the instructional practices that have direct impact upon learning to meet the needs of all students. It was during this period that I found that professional learning communities have a significant role in creating change that is relevant and effective in order to address instructional practices that work.

As a teacher, I found there was a significant amount of students that were from families that were migrant farmers in our community. The majority of these children have very limited English and were categorized in the ELL sub-group within our achievement data in our state-mandated assessments. Noticing a distinct disparity in this group, I began to research the impact of cultural differences and learning styles while working on my Specialist degree in Educational Leadership. Application of the cultural impact on learning was a central focus point on developing inclusive teams to address the learning disparities with this group.

As a principal, research from this study will address systemic processes that have a quantifiable effect upon student learning. Leading the process of gathering qualitative data, my role is to provide the supports that are inclusive of all stakeholders and addresses the individual learning needs of all students. Additionally, a sustainable process was developed to help PLC's address disparity within sub-groups and close achievement gaps and meet growth expectations.

Assumptions

Addressing the individual learning styles and cultural influences that effect student achievement is imperative to creating instructional practices vital to their success. Under this assumption, practices of professional learning communities should be inclusive of all stakeholders and provide diversity to meet these needs. Data should guide the decisions that are

made on an individual basis and be systematic and sustainable to meet these needs in order to provide an educational environment that is equitable to all children.

Definition of Key Terms

Terms and acronyms defined throughout this study are as follows:

Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (ACSIP): comprehensive plan utilized to guide a school systems goals, instructional programs, and strategies in order to meet all student's needs.

Differentiation: the various means in which teachers meet the individual learning needs of children within the instructional setting to include assessment of learning.

English Language Learners (ELL): those children whose native language is not English and have cultural differences that effect learning based upon language barriers in the academic setting.

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP): formative assessments utilized to create a personal measure of student progress, growth, and needs.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC): those diverse teams that are designed to identify the individual learning needs of students and advise instructional practices in order to meet the needs of all children within the school setting.

Response-to-Intervention (RTI): the multi-tier approaches that are taken to meet the learning needs of children who fail to achieve without additional assistance and supports.

Summary

Meeting the individual learning needs of children is nothing new to the challenges faced in our schools and in our classrooms. Differentiating to meet these many needs demands that teachers and stakeholders work closely together to help each child succeed. Professional learning

communities provide the tool to assess for student learning and approach intervention strategies in a more productive manner when identifying the specific and individual needs that will provide an education that is individualized, equitable, and successful.

Based upon past data and test scores within our district, teams have made great strides in helping children to be successful. However, the achievement gaps and growth models reflect a continuing disparity between our general populations and our sub-populations. Changing how we conduct these professional learning communities is vital to meeting this need. Findings from this study will inform teachers and administrators about effective instruction and intervention strategies to inform decisions. It is the researcher's hope that this study will empower teachers and enhance program evaluation and leadership capacity within professional learning communities.

Organization of the Dissertation

A review of literature focusing on the structure of effective learning communities is the focus of Chapter 2. Additional information was addressed in this review that addresses cultural and student interventions that assist teachers in identifying and meeting the individual learning styles of children. Chapter 3 describes the approaches that were developed during this study to gather data and inform changes within systemic changes of diverse professional learning communities. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the interviews conducted with participants, focus group discussions transcribed, and observations/minutes of team meetings conducted throughout the study. Chapter 5 includes the researcher's interpretation of data gained by this study and includes research methodology of this study. It also answers research questions and provides recommendations for practitioners and further research study.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Chapter

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. This chapter begins with a description of the search methods used to conduct a literature review and a historical background of educational efforts to close achievement gaps. The review of literature focuses on the structure and characteristics of effective PLCs. Literature is also examined that focuses on building leadership capacity among teachers and administrators.

Search Methods

Books cited within this study were chosen based upon the relevancy to the problem of practice. These books served as primary sources of information relating to the research questions. Journal articles and reviews were located using electronic databases including ProQuest, EBSCO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. These articles and reviews were considered relevant if applicable to answering the research questions of this study. ProQuest database was also utilized to search for dissertations related to professional learning communities. These dissertations were selected on the basis of relevancy and research methods similar to this study.

Historical Background

Historically, efforts have been made to address inequalities in the public school setting that have an effect on student learning and achievement. It is important to know the historical background that has driven public school initiatives that have provided ground roots movements to address the needs of all children. Though PLCs have not evolved from political initiatives, the process addresses the individual needs of all children through conversations driven by contextual situations and environments. Regardless of inequalities that may or may not continue to exist

within each context, PLCs provide educators with pertinent data about children and their instructional needs.

Addressing the issue of economic divide is not a new concept. Efforts to bridge this problem have driven political movements since the inception of our great nation. In addition to civil rights movements, laws have addressed this divide through the enactment of laws that specifically give guidance to public school laws and policies. This study is specifically focused upon strategies within professional learning communities that directly, or indirectly, affect the needs of children in the public school setting.

Beginning with the desegregation of public schools, *Brown v. Board of Education* was a pivotal court case which provided an equal foothold to education for all children. Being championed by Thurgood Marshall, the issues centered on the constitutionality of segregation in state-funded public schools. In May of 1954, the Supreme Court found that "... in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal..." (uscourts.gov, 2015). Even though there continues to be a divide in academic success, this provided the foundation for equality in education for all children.

Prioritizing equal education didn't take effect until ten years following this decision. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who believed that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal (DOE, 2015). Under the enactment of this law, federal grants provided additional funding and resources to improve the quality of education for low-income and special needs students. It would be another twenty years before federal oversight and accountability would be addressed to insure these initiatives were having an impact upon the gaps between socio-economic groups and races.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan addressed the issue of accountability in school reform.

In *A Nation at Risk*, President Reagan emphasized the urgency for change:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself (p. 1).

This rhetoric launched a campaign for states to standardize curriculum and set requirements for graduation. It also laid the foundation for accountability testing within our core content areas.

Additional reform under the Bush administration included the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (2001), calling for standards-based assessments nationally. In addition to establishing national tests, this bill served to regulate federal funding of programs through accountability to ensure educational opportunities for all children. During this same year, reauthorization of the ESEA linked Title I funds to standards-based reforms and led to the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). This strengthened the federal appropriation of funding within states to require accountability for closing achievement gaps.

Changes under the nation's present administration continue to demand accountability for creating an educational environment based upon equitable education and results. Amendment of NCLB is reflected in President Obama's *Race to the Top* initiatives. Continuance of NCLB under this policy strives to provide flexibility while holding resources and funds based upon results (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2009). Coming upon the conclusive years of No Child Left Behind, most schools have found that this has not been the effective solution to closing achievement gaps among students that have traditionally performed well academically and those who have failed.

Based upon formative and summative assessments, Targeted Achievement Group Gap (TAGG) children continue to show little to no improvement in reaching growth expectations based upon the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Plan. Based on this plan, “Fair, flexible, and focused accountability and support systems are critical to continuously improving the academic achievement of all students, closing persistent achievement gaps, and improving equity” (U.S. DOE, 2012).

Where there has been a focus on accountability for academic success, the focus has shifted from personal student responsibility toward holding the teachers, administrators, and school districts accountable for expectations with limited resources and without regard to any other factors that would inhibit their ability to attain goals set by Average Yearly Progress (AYP). Recently, the Arkansas Department of Education met with district leadership to discuss the findings of the U.S. Department of Education regarding our request to implement Common Core Standards. Through NCLB, school accountability and growth were monitored and based upon the year and growth each school was required to attain once placed. Common Core growth models focus on closing the achievement gap of target groups minimally maintaining acceptable levels of growth difference. “Focus schools” and “Priority schools” will categorize accountability standards based upon this model. There are presently over 100 schools statewide falling within the Focus school criteria, ours being one of them. Within our district, current fiscal restrictions and declining enrollment have also adversely affected our resources available to provide certain services to meet the challenge of growth.

Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning Communities

At present, our district leadership has implemented PLCs within each school building with a focus on driving achievement and learning within the various subjects. Based upon work

conducted by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004), professional learning communities (PLCs) “offer the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools” (p.2). DuFour et al. states that, “people who engage in collaborative team learning are able to learn from one another and thus create momentum to fuel continued improvement” (pg. 3). Effectively building teams made up of diverse members is essential for the success of creating an educational environment that provides diversity of services for a diverse group of students. In an effort to build efficacy and ownership of the learning process, implementation of PLCs provides the essential elements to successfully achieve this goal.

There are six areas of focus within PLCs: focus on learning, collaborative cultures, collective inquiry, action oriented, commitment to continuous improvement, and results oriented. A closer study of specific characteristics of PLCs is necessary to promote forward movement and growth in this middle school setting. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) contend that continuous improvement cycles are intended to provide systematic processes by which organizations can:

- Gather evidence of current levels of student learning
- Develop strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implement those ideas and strategies
- Analyze the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Apply new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement. (pg. 13)

Identifying data that reflects evidence of students’ diverse learning needs is an area of need for this school. In order for our school to successfully meet this need, it is important to have

an understanding of what diversity is and why it is so important. Koppelman (2013) states that, “diversity is the presence of human beings with perceived or actual differences based on a variety of human characteristics” (pg. 13).

While focus of learning has utilized student assessment data to drive current practices, reflection of individual student data (from these assessments) appear to be sporadic as evidenced in lesson plans. Olverson and Ritchey (2007) found “that teachers working collaboratively and using data from common assessments drove instructional practices that raise student achievement” (pg. 2). Additional demographic and individual student data should be included in PLC discussions in order to meet the individual learning needs of each student. It is the researcher’s assumption that this component is a main factor in the success of some PLCs within the middle school. A study conducted by Bennett, Ylamiki, Dugan, and Brunderman (2013) revealed, “complicated conversations about culture, race, ethnicity, and achievement gaps were largely avoided. Without these conversations, schools are limited in capacity for inclusion of students’/community culture and funds of knowledge in curriculum practices” (pg. 407). While gathering data about student achievement is important, it is equally important to consider other diverse issues that impact learning.

PLCs currently address individual needs through differentiating instruction, the development of interventions to meet each need, and assessment of learning that is formative in nature. Focus on instruction and activities are discussed within collaborative team meetings. Within team meetings, guidance for instruction follows researched-based processes. Formative assessments also guide discussion and change within PLCs. These include questioning and formal assessments that reflect immediate learning of the topic or objective. Assessments directed to the higher levels of Bloom’s and expectations should include what steps are taken

when students fail to meet these expectations. The “heart of teaching” is that of instruction and “engaging students in learning” (Danielson, 2007). Danielson emphasizes that PLCs utilize researched-based instruction and assessments focusing on the following instructional components:

1. Communicating with students.
2. Using questioning and discussion techniques.
3. Engaging students in learning.
4. Using assessment in instruction.
5. Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness. (pgs. 77)

When planning instructional practices, it’s important that we take approaches that meet the learning styles and cultures of each student. Dewey (1916) asserts that, “specific elements of an individual’s method or way of attack upon a problem (learning) are found ultimately in his native tendencies and his acquired habits and interests” (pg. 173). Null (2011) claims that, “learning within the context of moral and intellectual inquiry” (p. 30) is essential. Null also supports this by adding, “learning should not be seen as an end but rather as a means... (p. 30)”. Effective PLCs provide the tools to address these needs when members are focused on discussions that matter and have an impact on student learning.

Building Leadership Capacity

Administrators within the middle school should be instructional leaders with a focus on promoting professional development that is relevant. This focus should be upon professional development and building leadership capacity within our schools. Additionally, Cherkowski (2007) encourages school leaders to “engage in deeper and more meaningful professional learning relationships with teachers” in order to promote “personal growth in their professional

capacity” (p.64). Turner (2015) states, “the progress of educational reform depends on the individual and collective capacity of teachers to improve learning. Therefore, increasing capacity is crucial to continued, sustainable school improvement” (pg. 36). PLCs help support collaborative efforts that enhance this capacity. Building leadership capacity within these PLC teams is important to maintaining focus upon essential data that is relevant. Hall (2007) states, “PLCs lay the foundation for developing leaders and leadership capacity as a means to create a critical mass of leaders who will sustain the focus on school improvement” (pg. 45).

Professional learning communities are a highly effective tool for systematic approaches to monitoring student success through formative and summative assessment measurements and tools. Findings from Mele (2011) show:

typical school designs most often provide little or no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting in which they actually work and this disconnect between the requirements of learning to teach well and the structure of teachers’ work life is fatal to any sustained process of instructional improvement. (pg. 55)

Muhammad (2008) states, “leaders of PLCs help staff members keep their focus despite competing demands for attention. They recognize students cannot continually learn at higher levels unless educators are continually developing their capacity” (pgs. 16-17). As outlined by Marzano and Waters (2009), these meetings:

1. Systematically explore and examine instructional strategies.
2. Design a model or language for instruction.
3. Have teachers interact about the model or language of instruction.
4. Have teachers observe master teachers (and each other) using the model of instruction.
5. Monitor the effectiveness of individual teaching styles. (pgs. 56)

Providing structured time for teachers to collaborate and discuss student data is important to sustaining growth and leadership capacity in PLCs. Intensive collaborative efforts through PLCs are key to addressing the individual learning needs of the children while supporting leadership capacity building. Hall (2006) believes, “leadership development...was more likely to take place when professional learning communities are regarded as environments in which developing leadership capacity co-exists with and is crucial to sustained, substantive school improvement efforts” (pg. 48). Muhammad (2008) states, “leaders should not expect teachers to believe in students or to lead students to improved achievement, if they (leaders) do not believe in teachers and create the conditions that lead teachers to improved practice” (pg. 19).

Conceptual Framework

Based upon our school’s formative and summative assessments, Targeted Achievement Group Gap (TAGG) children continue to show little to no improvement in reaching growth expectations based upon the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Plan. Previous professional development was designed to meet their specific needs based upon data analysis in the three sub-groups of Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education, and English Language Learners. While our students have performed at extremely high levels, efforts fail to yield positive growth in closing the achievement gap of these sub-groups and the general student population. The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in middle schools. This research will inform practitioners about specific information to inform instructional practice in order to meet these diverse needs.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have driven educators to be more analytical in processes. This is to assist in addressing the individual learning needs of students in the

classroom and influence pedagogical practices. DuFour et al. (2004) provide the guidance by which educators are provided the skills to build effective team, analyze essential data, and reflect upon effective pedagogical practices. Approaching the problem of practice, the goal of this study is to determine a systematic means whereby PLCs can utilize pertinent information to inform instructional practices yet remain flexible enough to consider the variances that affect individual learning styles of every child. By restructuring these teams, I hope to provide support and guidance by utilizing data that will guide changes in processes while building leadership capacity within PLCs. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher's perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

At present, leadership has instituted the practice of PLCs, and is focused on driving achievement and learning within all core subjects. While the focus of learning has utilized student assessment data to drive current practices, individual teacher efforts continue to reflect an imbalance of achievement results. This also minimizes ownership for various members of the faculty.

Research includes the different aspects of learning when addressing the many needs of children in the classroom. Upon properly identifying the specific needs reflected in the data analysis, differentiation and interventions were researched-based to meet these needs.

Additionally, the focus on individual achievement has inconsistent practices when considering the diverse learning needs of the children needing additional interventions. Data analysis that informs instructional interventions must be consistent and researched-based when addressing

foundational skills and concepts designed to address these needs. According to Noonan (2013), threshold concepts represent important concepts, principles, and procedures predictably inviting struggle and requiring mastery to progress in the discipline or domain.

This review of literature focuses on structure of effective learning communities. Specifically, information within this review supports PLCs in building collaborative efforts that support learning through a sustainable commitment to improvement. Outlining this Problem of Practice with a background of educational changes, this literature review first considered the history of laws and policies surrounding the advancement of equity in education to support all children. National and state government approaches to solving cultural and economic divide between social classes have placed strong emphasis upon closing achievement gaps. It is important to understand the state and federal expectations helping meet student achievement goals. Meeting the needs of all children is and will continue to be a focus for improvement and accountability for all schools and professionals. Due to mandates placed upon schools which center on high stakes testing, many school cultures have crumbled. Instead of the focus being on school improvement and meeting individual student learning styles, the school's culture is that of meeting compliance and newly set achievement goals.

The understanding of design and effectiveness of PLCs is paramount to student achievement. Being able to analyze data is one of the key components of the PLC. Literature explaining the importance of this activity covers the different types of data and how it should inform PLC members about learning. Studies will reflect the use of both formative and summative assessments when analyzing data, and how they are used to inform instruction. It is important to note that, professional development will vary, but will generally focus on three specific areas; curriculum, instructional interventions, and differentiation through meeting the

diverse needs of children. PLCs will also be designed to build leadership capacity through six criteria. According to Lambert (2002) these include skillful participation, vision, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and student achievement, and they interact to create the new tasks of shared instructional leadership. Through the use of data, these PLCs will focus upon identifying conceptual thresholds within core subject matter. According to Meyer and Land (2003) these concepts are; “a conceptual ‘building block’ that progresses understanding of the subject; it has to be understood but it does not necessarily lead to a qualitatively different view of subject matter” (p.4). Figure 1 reflects the conceptual design of this study.



Figure 1 Professional Learning Communities Concept Map

By refining PLC practices within our school, this study provides the foundations for guiding effective instruction with focused relevant data and conversations while building

leadership capacity among administration and staff. Through analyzing formative and summative data, conceptual PLCs serve to inform interventions and differentiation. In order to meet the diverse needs of all children, these processes build upon systemic processes to meet growth expectations and close achievement gaps within the middle school curriculum.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. A review of literature focusing on specific characteristics of effective PLCs supports the need to conduct further study in order to provide contextual evidence of PLC practices and strategies that work in this school. Information was examined that focuses on building leadership capacity among teachers and administrators. Teacher efficacy and leadership capacity is necessary for shared ownership in results driven practices.

The middle school in this district has made great strides at improving instructional practices since implementing PLCs in their building. One grade has made exceptional improvement in addressing the individual needs of children through the use of formative data. It is my assumption that this group's specific PLC practices reflect a commitment to continuous improvement and shared ownership in the decisions made to address student needs. Further evidence through this study supports sustainable practices throughout the building. The following chapter outlines the methodology utilized in this study.

CHAPTER 3-INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. This chapter is an outline of this research study's methodology and is designed as a case study of the problem of practice. Through the use of interviews, the researcher took a case study approach to having a deeper understanding of data coded from these interviews.

Observations/team minutes were conducted by the practitioner of PLC processes and instructional practices. Interviews were conducted with participants in order to gather perceptual data relevant to effective PLC processes. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher's perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

This chapter includes: the researcher's rationale, the problem setting/context, research samples and data sources, data collection methods, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and limitations/delimitations. Included in this chapter is a summary of the methodology used to conduct the case study of professional learning communities in this middle school.

Rationale

Professional learning communities, are designed to address the individual learning needs of students through differentiation, interventions, and assessment of learning. Through the utilization of professional learning communities, reflection of instructional practices has focused upon formative assessment data and changes to influence individual academic improvement.

Constructionist theory suggests that pedagogical practices can be manipulated to influence learning through active participation of students. While some teams within this middle school have experienced great success, there are other professional learning communities, in the middle school, that struggle with making progress in student achievement.

By utilizing a case study approach, a deeper understanding of effective learning principles, is needed to understand the contextual influences in this school. Providing a deeper understanding of these experiences will provide professional learning communities with insights related to effective processes that inform pedagogical practices. Qualitative findings were analyzed to compare effective strategies to those efforts with little impact on student achievement.

Problem Setting/Context

This middle school serves a community of approximately 9,150 people. With an average income of \$27,000 annually, 20.1% of families fall below the poverty line. There are over 18.3% households with single mothers within the district. With such a high poverty level, 57.1% of children qualify for Free and reduced lunches. Even with a declining enrollment of 450 students, the student to teacher ratio is 14:1. Each of these factors has an effect upon our school resources and the attrition rate of teaching staff within the building and district.

Over the past five years, turnover within our building has effected over 60% of the certified teaching positions within the building. In addition to teaching positions, support staffing has not been replaced that was crucial to providing teachers with instructional data and guidance. Teachers retiring in the district have been less likely to be replaced and the majority of school staff have less than five years of experience. Throughout each grade level, every team has been effected by changes yet some teams continue to maintain efficiency of practice resulting in high

performance on state assessments. Future expectations indicate that more teachers will be retiring in the near future. With the lack of experienced teachers and expectations of more teachers retiring, this creates a need to analyze effective team dynamics and practices that have an impact on decisions that ensure students' academic success.

Based upon formative and summative assessments, Targeted Achievement Group Gap (TAGG) children continue to show little to no improvement in reaching growth expectations based upon the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Plan. Based upon this plan, "Fair, flexible, and focused accountability and support systems are critical to continuously improving the academic achievement of all students, closing persistent achievement gaps, and improving equity" (U.S. DOE, 2012).

Professional learning communities have been implemented throughout this school to focus on the individual learning needs of students and instructional practices to meet these needs. Presently, there are three professional learning communities within the building. Each of these communities were formed based upon grade level with various content in each community. The purpose of these teams were to meet the academic needs of children within each grade by sharing knowledge of students within each grade. While the focus of learning has utilized student assessment data to drive current practices, the individual teacher efforts within these groups continues to create an imbalance of achievement results and minimizes ownership for various members of the faculty. This imbalance is noticeably different among professional learning communities with some having positive impact upon student learning, and some with little improvement.

The characteristics of these teams vary in educational background, age, and content area. It is the researcher's belief that specific elements within these professional learning communities

are significant in having positive effect upon student learning. Through this case study, the researcher intends to provide educators within this setting with essential elements that inform effective instructional decisions within professional learning communities in this school.

Research Sample and Data Sources

To develop a deeper understanding of the problem of practice, purposeful sampling of participants was utilized in this study. Random sampling is not possible due to the minimal number of participants in this middle school setting. Based upon Seidman (2013), this method of selection is “best to select participants who will facilitate the ability of others to connect if random sampling is not an option” (p. 55). Participants participated on a voluntary basis, and were comprised of certified middle school staff to include teachers, administrators and educational support providers within the building. All teachers and educators are considered stakeholders in this process and were invited to participate in this study as participants.

According to Seidman (2013), case study interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to stories of a relatively few participants (p. 59). Each participant was asked to sign a consent form and given no monetary compensation for their involvement in this study. In order to protect the integrity of the interviews, consent forms covered all federal guidelines and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Participants were able to review interview transcripts prior to publication of this study.

Along with scripted questions, participants were asked to provide descriptive and demographic information regarding educational level and years of experience. This information was collected prior to the researchers arriving for the interview. Within the study interview questions conducted, descriptive information was gathered to reflect the characteristics of

participants and shared in table form. Contents of this table depict: number of participants, educational level, years' experience, and years within the district. In order to protect participant confidentiality, identifying descriptors and personal information were excluded from this study. Purpose of the study and results were shared with all participants at each observable activity.

Data Collection Methods

For this study, qualitative research methods were utilized to conduct a case study of middle school professional learning communities. Information from various methods was considered that may have an impact upon instructional practices and decision-making processes that support teacher efficacy in professional learning communities. The data collection methods utilized in this case study were interviews, focus groups, and observations/team minutes. Purposeful sampling of participants was utilized in this study in order to conduct a deeper understanding of the problem of practice.

Interviews

Qualitative data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews to determine teacher perceptions of practices that have the most impact upon student learning. The purpose and focus of questioning through interviews was to gather perceptions and feelings about impacts on student learning and leadership capacity within professional learning communities. Interviews were compared for validation and coding purposes within the analysis of this study. The purpose of the study was reiterated with each interviewee. Participants were chosen on a voluntary basis and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were conducted privately in a setting that was agreed upon by the participant and lasted no longer than one hour.

Observations

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), observation is a “central and fundamental method of inquiry and is used to explain complex interactions in natural social settings” (pg. 155). The purpose of the observation was to gather information about the characteristics of professional learning communities in the middle school and decision-making processes of each community. Observations of professional learning communities provided rich data to inform the case study about group interactions and decisions. Scripted notes from observations are relevant to informing this case study of practices relevant to student learning and characteristics that promote continuous improvement of leadership capacity among administrators and professional learning communities. For the purpose of this study, the researcher took a non-participatory role while observing professional learning communities in the middle school.

Participants

Participants were comprised of certified middle school staff to include 10 teachers in grades 6-8, two administrators, and one counselor. These participants were comprised upon a voluntary basis from teachers, administrators and educational support providers within the building. All teachers and educators are considered stakeholders in this process and were invited to participate in this study as participants.

Data Analysis Methods

Techniques within this study included a case study approach, and triangulation of multiple qualitative methods to ensure validity and trustworthiness of data analysis. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study to inform the researcher of personal experiences that effect decisions within professional learning communities and build capacity among all stakeholders of these communities. Open coding was conducted of interviews taken from the participants in this

research study. Quotes and codes were transferred to an Excel document and categorized by like concepts. These categories lead to the identification of five categorical themes: curriculum, team dynamics, leadership, professional development, and past influences/current realities.

Observations of team meetings were conducted to identify practices that supported categorical themes found in collected interview and focus group data.

Rich qualitative inquiry guided depth-of-understanding for all stakeholders involved in making instructional decisions through interviews conducted throughout this study. Professional learning communities presently use agendas to guide instructional decisions through a series of informational seeking questions. Information gained through the efforts of this study will provide professional learning communities with a better understanding of cultural influences on learning and refine current processes to empower members of these communities.

Trustworthiness

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the different lenses that shape the validity of work of qualitative researchers include the lens of the researcher, of the research participants, and of other individuals external to the study (p. 188). Within this research, multiple lenses ensured the validity and trustworthiness of this qualitative case study. Through guidance provided by the dissertation committee and established protocols approved by the University of Arkansas Internal Review Board (IRB), checks were in place to ensure external gatekeepers of the validity of this study. Ethical consideration to the participants was provided through protocols ensuring confidentiality and safe guarding of personal information. The researcher also provided ongoing feedback to participants by communicating any patterns through coded interviews and read back any interviews conducted for clarity and confirmation. Providing validation of professional practices, in the form of feedback, will help professional learning communities build leadership

capacity of participants. Interviews were conducted in a professional manner and in a non-threatening environment to the participants. Recordings of interviews were transcribed and shared with participants for accuracy and clarification. During the process, information was kept confidential and identities of participants were protected. No identifying information of the school or participants was used in any reporting. Letters were assigned to identify participant transcript information and safeguard confidentiality.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to focus on five validity criteria found in action research studies. A qualitative approach has been taken through the form of a case study, yet external validity of findings may be applied to action research methodology when establishing trustworthiness of this study. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), these criteria include: outcome, process, democratic, dialogic, and catalytic validity (p. 67).

Outcome

Outcome validity refers to the action that occurs as a result of the study. The outcomes of this case study were used to identify leadership supports that have a positive effect upon professional learning communities. Indicators for leadership support must be identified and action taken to make improvements of existing processes within these teams. Providing similar themes through in-depth study of coded interview results will enable collaborative sharing of successful supports to these communities which will meet the specific needs of students.

Process

Process validity refers to the measure and degree of which the processes are checked through an ongoing manner during the study. Due to the qualitative nature of this study the researcher was able to triangulate information through in-depth approaches to the problem of practice. Findings include information from interviews and observations. Due to the participatory

nature of this case study, process validity is insured through the reflexive processes of triangulation of findings through multiple qualitative methods. Ongoing validation of findings was scheduled and discussed at points throughout the study within the interview dialogue.

Democratic

Democratic validity refers to the extent at which all members share ownership in the study. Democratic validity is inclusive of stakeholders throughout the participant sample. Through purposeful sampling, participants were interviewed while conducting this study. Due to the number of participants, all members of this setting had an opportunity to participate in the study. Stakeholders include: administrators and teachers to make valid comparisons of data in leadership support efforts that effect professional learning communities. Collaborative efforts are also incorporated within this process through the use of interviews and process-oriented discussions within professional learning communities. Interviews of participants provided multiple input within settings that are consistent and was reviewed by participants for validity. Inclusion of all professional learning community members was on a voluntary basis and all were provided the opportunity to participate in this study.

Catalytic

Catalytic validity refers to the ability of the study to move participants and others involved toward understanding the realities of the problem and the motivating factors to take action as a result of that understanding. Understanding that reflexivity can have an effect upon the nature of the study being conducted, the researcher will use study findings to understand and make recommendations for changes in the area of leadership supports. Though the researcher has guiding research questions, journals and reflective practice guided the case study. Interviews guided discussions to deeply understand leadership supports and their effects on student learning.

Dialogic

Dialogic validity refers to the efforts to provide researched-based peer review during and after research studies have been conducted. Formal dialogic validity was not conducted until the completion of this study. However, collaborative inquiry through interviews drove this process throughout the study. The researcher gathered findings for leadership supports and effective decision-making processes that inform instructional practices. These efforts reflect ongoing dialogic validity throughout the study in both effort and positionality.

Limitations and Delimitations

A qualitative approach was chosen for this case study for the purpose of providing rich and in-depth findings to inform stakeholders of effective practices for professional learning communities. Identifying the limitations of this study is important in maintaining integrity of research efforts and design. Because of the nature of this action research study, there are multiple limitations that could affect results and findings of this study. Through researcher efforts to provide safeguards, these limitations had minimal effect on the efforts of both, researcher and participant thus maintaining the integrity of the findings.

Interviews provide qualitative studies with rich information that informs this study. Participation in these interviews may provide information that is biased to the viewpoints of the participants, and to the interpretation of the researcher. The researcher allowed each participant the opportunity to read transcripts following each interview in order to eliminate mistakes from the researcher and allowed the participant to clarify any thoughts or mistakes. Personal biases of the researcher may also have an effect upon the interpretation of thematic patterns found in this study. Insider positionality may also skew process efforts and findings due to the researcher's role as administrator in this middle school.

Efforts designed to address delimitations of study design provide rigor and integrity to this dissertation study. The researcher understands the importance of minimizing biases held within the study. Research methods designed for this study provide delimitations providing for criteria to address any biases held by the researcher. Member checks by participants served to guide research design that focus the efforts of the researcher. Protocols and procedures during any involvement of participants in this study were developed to safeguard the confidentiality of participants and their opinions. Letters and procedures were clearly defined and with consent of the participants.

Summary

Providing an education that is equitable and meets the learning needs of all children is essential to closing the achievement gap in our schools. Based upon research conducted by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2004), professional learning communities (PLC's), "offer the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools" (p.) to meet the challenges that educators face when making high-impact decisions. The development of collaborative teams has a positive effect when all stakeholders involved are collectively brought together within professional learning communities and interventions are restructured to provide timely, viable instruction within the general classroom setting based upon research-based information.

Presenting a case study designed to deeply engage the researcher and participants in experience rich information is necessary to clearly identify the issues surrounding the problem of practice faced by this middle school. Triangulation of qualitative findings through interviews, and observations is necessary to answer the research questions within this study. Based upon the success of some professional learning communities within this middle school, there are characteristics and factors that drive effective decisions about student learning and empower

teachers and administrators involved, while other continue to struggle with having positive effects on students. Qualitative methods are essential to providing experiential feedback relevant to making change.

CHAPTER 4-RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. For this study, I chose a qualitative approach through the form of a case study. This study seeks to gain insight that will inform the instruction and intervention strategy decision-making process that PLCs need to exhibit in the context of this specific school site. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher's perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

Summary of Research Design

For this study, qualitative research methods were utilized to conduct a case study of middle school professional learning communities. Information from various methods were considered that may have an impact upon instructional practices and decision-making processes that support teacher efficacy in professional learning communities. The data collection methods utilized in this case study were interviews, focus groups, and observations/minutes of team meetings.

The focus of this chapter provides an analysis of the interviews conducted with participants, focus group discussions transcribed, and observations/minutes of team meetings conducted throughout the study. Demographic information is provided about the school and the participants of this study. Analysis of each datum was coded and categorized utilizing conceptual

frameworks within the study design. Finally, findings were triangulated for validity utilized in action research methodology for providing feedback and change within the context of this middle school environment.

Findings

Background Information

This middle school serves a community of approximately 9,150 people. With an average income of \$27,000 annually, 20.1% of families fall below the poverty line. There are over 18.3% households with single mothers within the district. With such a high poverty level, 57.1% of children qualify for Free and reduced lunches. Even with a declining enrollment of 450 students, the student to teacher ratio is 14:1.

Professional learning communities have been implemented throughout this school to focus on the individual learning needs of students and instructional practices to meet these needs. Presently, there are three professional learning communities within the building. Each of these communities were formed based upon grade level with various content in each community. The purpose of these teams was to meet the academic needs of children within each grade by sharing knowledge of students within each grade.

Participants of this study consisted of certified middle school staff to include 10 teachers in grades 6-8. These participants were comprised upon a voluntary basis from teachers, while all teachers and educators are considered stakeholders in this process and were invited to participate in this study as participants.

The ten participants of this study who consented to interviews were comprised to provide representation from each team. The demographic characteristics of the teacher sampling varied in multiple areas which included experience, content, and educational level. Professional content areas included the four core content areas in addition to representation from courses in the

electives. Table 1 reflects the experience level and education level of each participant in this study:

Table 1

Education and Experience Level of Teacher Participants

Name	Years' Experience	Education
Teacher A	22	Masters
Teacher B	26	Bachelors
Teacher C	26	Bachelors
Teacher D	12	Bachelors
Teacher E	26	Masters
Teacher F	5	Bachelors
Teacher G	20	Masters
Teacher H	2	Masters
Teacher I	4	Masters
Teacher J	13	Masters

Transcribed Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 10 certified educators from the middle school staff and were interviewed on a voluntary basis. Participants represented an equal balance of teachers from the existing PLC teams within the middle school. Participants in this study are identified as: Teacher A, Teacher B, ... etc., as agreed upon by approved IRB protocols. The demographic characteristics of the teacher sampling varied in multiple areas which included experience, content, and educational level. Professional content areas included the four core content areas in addition to representation from courses in the electives.

Interviews were conducted in an agreed setting with each participant to provide a comfortable and secure environment that would allow them to speak openly and honestly. These interviews were designed to be informal and conversational in nature to elicit answers that would indicate the participant's intrinsic feelings and beliefs about their professional learning community and teams. A digital recorder was used during the interviews and transcriptions were made from each recorded interview. Participants were able to review their transcribed information in order to correct, retract, or add any additional information to clarify the data collected. All recordings were kept confidential throughout the study and opportunity to withdraw their statements as stated in chapter 3 of this dissertation and IRB protocols approved by the University of Arkansas.

Open-coding was conducted of each transcribed interview and analyzed to identify outstanding descriptors and categories from direct quotes. These quotes and codes were transferred to an Excel document and categorized by like concepts. These categories lead to the identification of five categorical themes: curriculum, team dynamics, leadership, professional development, and past influences/current realities. Table 2 shows the codes with categorical themes resulting from the first and second cycle coding:

Table 2 *Categories and Themes Found*

Curriculum	Team Dynamics	Leadership	Professional Development	Past Influences/ Current Realities
goal oriented	member value	mutual accountability	content centered	previous teacher influences
data focused	team demographics	leaders value opinions	pedagogy	influence in content area
relates to students	established norms	leaders communicate often	team positives	family influences
previous experience	mutual respect	support for collaboration	team negatives	team values
essentials standards	embracing new ideas	mutual respect	continuous improvement	current realities
learning moments	time valued	shared leadership	variety of personalities	love for children
teacher enthusiasm	depth of focus	self-accountability	team cultures established	
shared workloads/ideas	belief and purpose		technology based	
collaborative discussions	open conversations		shared learning	
student achievement	negative attitudes		stagnation	
instruction focused	inclusive participations		relevant to needs	
			prevents stagnation	
			effective vs. ineffective	

Curriculum

The first categorical theme that developed from data analysis from individual interviews had an emerging relationship within the area of curriculum and instruction. Second cycle coding

reflected three specific factors that had an impact upon student learning when professional learning communities made decisions based upon these factors.

Specific focus upon student learning was noted as a key difference in teams that had great success and those that did not do as well. Teacher A stated:

Professional learning communities are focused on learning, which has not been what our focus was on in the past. Our focus was on individual students, on their grades, behavior, filling out forms on those particular kids, it was not about focusing on what are we going to actually teach them.

Teams that maintained a high level of learning, as indicated by assessment data tended to focus their conversations upon this type of information. Minutes from meetings showed a distinct difference in discussion focus of the team. Teacher G described some of these differences by saying:

Professional learning communities are more structured. We stay on task more and we stay focused more. We are analyzing data more than we did with our later team meetings. There was a time when we would analyze data in our team meetings because we were working on getting the bubble kids moved up then that kind of fell away and now we're back to that. We have a focus now, I think before when we used to meet in teams, yes, we would say, "Okay, what can we do to help the students do better?" If we had failing students we've been calling me in and we'd call their parents and say, "Hey, you're failing", "Why are you failing?" But we never really set a goal, there was no, "what can we specifically do to help this student"?

The change in team practices indicates the differences of effective versus ineffective teams is the focus on student data to drive decision making versus ongoing discussions that lacked focus. Not only was there a focus on student data that was lacking in previous team meetings, but the establishment of goals was noticed to be a difference in these teams. Teacher B supports this by saying, "Because you have goals and you have to meet, you want to stay on the goal. In regular team meetings, you really didn't have a lot of goals that were academic. These are more effective." Teachers from different teams found that through shifting team discussion

from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, instructional decisions were more effective in having an impact on student learning outcomes. Teacher C stated:

I think on a regular team meeting, it's more about the business at hand that we have to take care of, just deadlines and things, where this is due, or make sure you remember this. Those kinds of things. Professional learning community, to me, that's more getting in to detail with individual students, and talking more specifically about what their progress is in each class, what each one of us is doing, and what the child is doing. And if they're not performing at a certain level, what other areas do we need to look at to help them?

Reflection upon student learning has been stressed when developing strategies to meet deficiencies that may be evident in student assessment data. Teacher E commented on some of the differences her team was utilizing within PLC's that had an impact by stating, "you use reflection. You are reflecting on everything you do. Everything. Every decision you make, everything you say to a child, I mean, it really makes you reflect and think about what you do daily." She also explained specific examples by saying:

Because we had taught genetics and we know our kids know how to predict these genetic outcomes because we have worked for days and days, they were getting it, they made good scores on their test, but then when I saw it on the ACT Aspire they didn't do well. And so we looked at that data, we're like, "Why?" We looked at each question and then put it up on our head and ask students and I know you guys how to do this information that they don't understand how data type was also arranged. So it was information that they could get in a pan square. They understand that but they didn't know-- Oh, that's what they put they put in that data table? So once we went back and re-taught and had them create their own data table and then retest it, that's a huge improvement.

Utilizing this ACT Aspire data is also used in other teams to inform instruction. Teams of teachers began to disaggregate test results together to identify deficiencies in certain strands. Once this was done, teams developed instructional strategies to help kids to understand essential skills and questioning more accurately. Teacher H stated:

Last year we kind of went over other things. This year we are more focused on the ACT aspire questions and how we can get the kids to be able to answer those questions more effectively; like how to break them apart and know what they're really being asked.

Utilizing data to inform teams about student learning has made an impact upon their classroom assessments as well as personal feelings about reflective practices. Teacher I stated:

With our content, collaborating within content, I think that focuses on assessment and instruction more so because we can talk about specific instructional strategies that we're using to teach specific things in our content, and how we're assessing whether it's formative or summative. We're taking that and we're looking at that assessment data and we're coming back and we're saying, "Okay, this didn't work. What can we do different?" or "This was effective. So, we need to implement that more." So, to me, it's not just about who you're meeting with and when you're meeting. But seeing it connect to the classroom is a big "Aha" moment I guess.

The second component that had an impact upon curriculum and instruction was the idea of a shared workload when teams met with intention to impact practice. Teams that were not as effective rarely shared ideas and strategies within their team meetings. Effective teams within the building showed a high amount in team collaborative efforts to share workloads and responsibilities. Teacher B stated:

Sharing ideas among your colleagues is wonderful. Even getting on a computer and looking up ideas is wonderful and getting to physically be able to have time to collaborate with your colleagues, it just helps with your stress. You can tackle more projects, you can help the students better, you just work as a team.

Based upon observations conducted of the teams, emphasis was placed upon the sharing of responsibilities in highly effective teams, while lack of shared effort was evident in other teams. Teacher A added, "When I had a partner teacher she would do one thing and I would do something else and we would split it and then share those things, so we weren't doing it all, and that was really nice." Teacher A also stated, "Just sharing ideas, 'What are you doing? What did you use to help with this concept?' was really important."

Shared conversations within professional learning communities not only included collaboration about teaching strategies. Focus upon shared students was found to be equally important when addressing learning. Teacher C states:

I think that when you're able to really talk about your students and what you're teaching, you become a stronger teacher because you're able to see what--Well, for one thing, you can talk with the other teachers about what they're teaching and help their teaching it different than you are or what you're doing is the same.

These collaborative teams have found that differentiation of teaching was addressed more efficiently when they were able to have the freedom to discuss individual learning styles of students. Teacher F stated:

When we get together and we meet, we're able to talk about students that are struggling or what's working for one teacher that might not be used in yours that might can help you in working your classroom. We discuss different ways, different techniques to teaching and different ways that we can do this, that or the other. I think that collaboration is very important. If I come across something that is not working for me or I see may not be working for another teacher, I'm able to go to that other teacher and say, "Hey, why don't you try this way or this is what I do, what do you think about this?" Or I can bounce ideas so they can bounce out ideas off me and we're able to come to a conclusion as to what needs to be done to make sure that we're getting what we got to do.

These types of discussions were more often observed in grade level team meetings where teacher shared the same students. It was observed that teachers felt more comfortable with their grade level peers when discussing issues that may focus on pedagogy. Teacher H emphasized that follow-up is important in this process by stating:

One would be grade level the next week was our content teams but we use these... to ask questions about, "Well, how did you do this or what can I do differently on this lesson to make it more engaging for the kids?"

Classroom management has also been affected through these grade level teams. Prior to this study, evidence of collaborative behavioral strategies was found to be present in teams whose students were performing at higher levels. Since this study began other teams of teachers began to discuss ways in which they could share these strategies. Teacher I stated:

In grade level, I think that focuses more on maybe classroom management, the structure of your classroom. And because if I'm having trouble with one student, but that student is behaving in another class, then I can look at what I'm doing differently, and maybe it's something that I -- a way I've structured my class that that student doesn't thrive in that kind of environment.

When discussing the collaboration between grade level and content teams, there was equal value to sharing strategies within the content teams. Teacher I stated:

Being able to collaborate with not just our grade level teachers that also teach the same grade level but also the same content is very effective. We know that this job changes constantly. So, being able to share strategies and things that we implement in our classroom that work or don't work. Being able to share that and gain insight from other people is very helpful.

Implementation of common assessments was a focus of professional development that was provided to content teams. By sharing common assessments, teachers worked together to produce assessments for their classes. Teacher J explained how her team values this shared team effort by stating:

When you have multiple teachers, one, you can share the workload. I mean, a lot like when it was two of us doing eighth grade Math. I might make her warm ups based on our data and then she would make the test, or she would make the test and I'd make the warm ups. And then, anytime, she would make something that would be beneficial in the class. She did it for me. We work on our tests and like I'm going to make test then she looks at it, and she make -- you know, like I say, "Why do we want this question? Let's move it here." And then, we get together and decide on what point values we're going to give things, and what we're going to make more important than others, and we make that decision together.

Frequently this type of team work was met with disagreements about curriculum alignment and identification of essential skills and requirements. Through this shared teamwork, teachers were able to form a common understanding of principles within content and grade level.

Teacher J stated:

For the most part, we tend to always -- Math people to think alike. So, we tend to have less disagreements when it comes to that. Other than that, if there's a time we have a disagreement, it would be more so about the way you read a standard. I might read it one way and somebody else read it on other. So that we have to have a discussion about collectively, "Okay, what does that mean then?" But there's not really, I mean like, disagreements because when you're a Math person, you tend to think alike.

Utilizing summative assessments and state mandated testing data helped teachers to focus upon student weaknesses. Using this type of data, teams began to develop instructional

strategies focused on these areas. Teacher I stressed the importance of these conversations by stating:

I think just from our discussions at looking at the assessment data. If you're referring to content, looking at where our students may be on the ACT Aspire. The areas that they are weak, because I believe that that's an area where our teaching or instruction is weak.

Some teachers have begun to share these same types of discussions with their students.

When asked to explain this approach, Teacher H stated:

Group activities where we get together and we kind of discuss in partners or in groups of three or four. They'll discuss like questions or give them stories and then we're kind of bring it back to the whole class and kind of discuss well, did everybody come up with the same answer or did we kind of have different viewpoints.

Teacher B gave an explanation why she used team strategies within her instruction by explaining:

You know you can use the PLC in your classroom, too. It also helps you with your students to value their opinion, "Are you actually learning this material?" So, some of these techniques I brought in to the classroom and used it on my students.

The third component that effected instructional practices was in student relations.

Patterns emerged through the interview process that show the importance of collaboratively talking about relationships that have a noticeable impact on student learning. Being able to relate to students was evidenced by several characteristics. Teacher A related to students by stating:

There have been a lot of situations in my eighth grade math class where I can relate and say, "Do you remember back in first grade or second grade when your teachers did this, they were building to this, this is where we are now", so because I taught at those lower levels, I can see those connections now from the lower to the upper.

Teacher G added that enthusiasm is just as important by stating:

I think my enthusiasm because the stories that I've picked, I really enjoy those not just for enjoyment, but I just think there's a lot of themes and different things that can come out of it. I think that boils over to the students, and I break things down from there.

Changes that have been made through effective use of professional learning communities has provided significant perceptual transformations within the staff. Providing focus to grade level and content teams has offered a culture of learning that has been embraced school-wide.

Teacher E stated:

We have just started so we really haven't seen any hard data. But, I feel like there is going to be a correlation between student achievement because if everyone's focused on helping the children who need those skills, and they see it in every class, it's going to start to transfer and the students are going to start doing better all across the board.

She also added:

I like the fact that it focuses on what essential skills. When we sit down as a science team and we picked out essential skills, we really had to think, what are the skills that students use no matter what grade they're in for science and no matter what subject they're studying. I think a lot of the factors have been successful and like I said, we're just getting started. Just everyone has been focused, having to design goals and working towards goals and using the same, not necessarily the exact same strategies but sharing strategies on how you can make those goals.

Before this study, teams that were highly effective in creating student growth had an end purpose in mind when designing instruction. All teams were given training in developing goals for learning outcomes that guided instruction. Team discussion transformed conversations designed to have an impact upon their classroom practices. Teacher I stated:

One thing that comes to mind, each team is in the process of creating or they've already created SMART goals. And if you look at the SMART goals and then you look at how we're -- our action plan of how we're implementing those in the classroom, that's how it ties from just a meeting to the classroom.

Impact of professional learning communities' practices upon curriculum and instruction has been positive within this middle school. One of the biggest differences can be summed by Teacher H when she stated, "I think a regular team meeting is more talking and discussing while PLC is focused on the students and their progress and how we can get them to a higher level of learning". Teacher H further went on to elaborate that:

If you're focused on student learning and you're using data to back that up, and if you're using that data and you're focused on that learning, then I think you're going to see improvements and results in the classroom. But on the other hand, if you're meeting just to meet or not using data to drive that discussion, then I think it can be very ineffective.

Teacher B stated another obstacle was, “Of course, teachers are always busy but having enough schedule time to do it, that's a factor or a hindrance.”

Team Dynamics

The second theme that emerged from data analysis is that of team dynamics. Open coding showed that when teachers were questioned about the collaboration of teams, professional learning communities showed characteristics of reflected perceptions that share value of collaborative team meetings, respect for each other as professionals, mutual understanding of purpose and belief in their efforts.

Collaborative professional team meetings are essential to providing a culture of learning where students succeed, and teachers thrive professionally. Building teams effectively through professional learning communities are reflective of efforts to support team dynamics vital to this growth. Teacher E stated:

Working with teams has made a huge difference. I really started to learn that there were other ways to do things that I never thought of. I learned from all the other teachers. It didn't matter what subject they taught, I could learn something from them. We also were more effective working with the students because we were sharing information.

Working in isolation, teachers often became overwhelmed by the expectations and demands of “high stakes” testing. By using a team approach, teachers are supporting each other in meeting these high expectations. Teacher B shared:

I think it's been more successful because of the collaborating with my colleagues especially in my content is so important for all the students to-- we have high goals, high standards for those students to meet and we're doing it together and we're looking at data, this is only benefiting the students.

Teachers within this building support team approached to meeting students' needs. Even though there may be varied opinions about what these needs are, teachers' comments shared the sentiment that professional learning communities are vital to identifying these needs. When questioned about the importance of team meetings, Teacher C stated:

I think that even though we've all got different subjects that we teach and varying methods that we use and styles, I think we all expect the same from our students. I think as far as discipline-wise, we're all on the same page with everything. In my group, there's not a student that everyone has the same expectation for. We're all trying to get them to be successful, but I think with collaborating with each other that we are more maybe in tuned with what they need and trying to help them be successful.

Some teachers realized that varied opinions and personalities were important in forming effective teams. Without the opportunity to meet in teams, a different perspective would not be considered when analyzing student data. Teacher F stated:

Because we're given the opportunity to meet and bounce that. If we weren't allowed to and we have to spend our time teaching and not being able to communicate with one another then that would be disastrous because we weren't able to share things of what's going on within our classrooms. When you're by yourself, you're not able to see, especially what you do from different personality, you got to know south, east, west. I'm a north person so I just plan, I just go but there are planners. There are people that just sporadically. There are people that going to look in the far future. So, with different people within your team, you're able to see the different things that may happen inside of PLC.

Finding time to meet within the day was a challenge for this school. Because of a tight schedule, teams had to be conscious of their time spent in team discussion. Even with time constraints, teachers were adamant about having team meetings. Teachers utilized structured agendas to address student needs without wasting time. This has benefited the process in how teachers spent their time and enhanced the value teachers had for it. Teacher H stated:

I think having it has made us be more focused and stay on task and not just kind of bird walking on different subjects, having that time frame of this is how long we have and we know we have to get it done, I think that helps.

Details that often go with no regards to the effect on classroom performance was found to be of importance to some teams. They found that the small details had an effect upon the learning environment and atmosphere created through intentional decision-making of their teams. Teacher I stated:

One example, in our grade level meeting, we recently just finished discussing procedures that we use in our classroom like how we start our class, and how we end our class. And those may seem kind of small and silly but in all honesty, that's -- I mean, that can create a whole atmosphere for your classroom and just being able to listen and discuss the strategies with other teachers and learn what they're doing and try that in here and see if it's effective, that's been very helpful.

Without collaborative teams, teachers expressed that they felt isolated in their efforts to meet student needs. Having worked in teams prior to this study, one teacher expressed her concerns and desire to be a part of a team. Teacher J expressed her opinion by stating:

I think it helps when you don't feel like you're all alone. Helps when you can collaborate with somebody else. This year has been more difficult because I am by myself. I only teach -- I'm the only one who teaches what I teach. So, I definitely felt the lack of collaboration be a hindrance for me like it's been a struggle for me more so than ever this year because I'm by myself. More by myself than I've ever been. And then being able to collaborate work with another person that teaches the same thing is makes -- your life is so much easier.

When asked whether they felt their opinions were valued within their professional learning communities, teachers elaborated openly about the specific reasons why they felt valued. Teacher B said, "everybody stops and listens. You can tell eye contact, they're looking at you and acknowledging. I think everybody's opinion in our teams are valued. When someone actually does what advise you suggested then I know, okay it's valued". Teacher C stated:

I think we're all pretty open with what we're doing and everybody is respectful of everyone else's opinions, the direction that we need to take, and what we need to do. I think as far as voicing your concern or your opinions has not been an issue with us. We're all able to do that. If we do have something that maybe is a little different, we're open to each other's suggestions.

When asked why she felt this was able to occur, Teacher C replied, “I think we all get along pretty well. It may not be so if we didn't get along so well, but you got to have a group that works well together in order to really get anything done”.

Some teachers view this value as a sense of professionalism shared between their team members. Valuing each other's opinions is viewed by these members as a professional expectation. Teacher D stated, “My fellow educators all know that we're all educated people and we know what we're doing and we know what we're talking about and your opinion is just as valid as mine and I think that's an understanding.” Other teachers were not as confident in how much her opinions were valued but assumed that valued was shared due to ongoing dialog and communication among her team members. Teacher E stated:

The other teachers seem to value my advice and my suggestions on how to do things. They don't have a problem coming in and asking me, "Have you done this before?" or "Do you have any activities for the years?" I don't know. I think we value each other.

This value is expected within on teacher's team. When asked if she could share within her PLC, Teacher F stated:

Absolutely, no one person's does the whole conversation. I mean I come across something that I want to talk about. I'm allowed to speak. Nobody shuts me, or shuts each other down, because that's what we're there for. We're there to collaborate. We're there to share.

In all teams, norms and expectations guide procedures for communication in each meeting. Teacher G felt that certain procedures allowed for everyone to share by stating, “we all are taking turns and we let people talk, and I don't feel like anybody feels like they're hindered in saying what he or she means”. By setting procedures in place, everyone has a chance to participate without feeling intimidated. This was commented to have a team building effect on the team climate and culture by creating rapport. When asked for further details for the reasons why this was successful, Teacher G replied, “respect for one another and rapport, because if you

don't feel comfortable with someone then you're not going to be able to open up and be honest about things". Teacher H was appreciative of her teams input when asked whether she felt valued and was able to share. Teacher H stated, "it's absolutely supportive. The teachers here are great to answer questions for me or give me examples or you know kind of push me to get to where I need to be". Teacher I stated:

I've always felt like I could voice my opinion. I've never felt intimidated not to or criticized for having a different opinion. I feel like we all respect each other, and we also understand that what may work for one person may not necessarily work for another person.

Teachers throughout the school value their time. Adding extra time into the school day to meet meant adjusting schedules and utilizing some time from conference periods {as allowed by law). When asked about the value of meeting within professional learning communities, participants were open to share their concerns. Teacher F stated, "it's absolutely not taken for granted. I mean we really beg for that time". When asked why it was so important, Teacher F stated:

We sit down and discuss students more so or maybe what we're getting ready to teach or those different kinds of things but what we're doing in this year is digging deep into what a PLC is. What it means? What should take place? What you're supposed to be looking for in certain things? How to make sure certain things work, and in a regular team meeting we don't go that deep.

Some teams have made extra efforts to make sure these meetings take place. Teacher I stated, "When our scheduled changed, we've had to adapt in creative ways for our teachers to be able to collaborate. So -- But now, we've incorporated ways that we can collaborate with content and in grade level."

Value for structured time to meet has created a culture of respect according to some teachers. Collaborative efforts to meet the needs of children is attributed to the respect teachers

have for each other and the desire to do what's best for children is shared by each other. Teacher

I stated:

I think our atmosphere here just has that respect. It's required I would say, it's expected and just knowing that, I mean, we're all doing what's best for these kids and having that belief and that reassurance is what helps you respect everyone you work with.

Unified decision-making processes help ensure that everyone supports opinions and changes. It was commented that even when teachers disagreed they maintained respect for each other. Teacher J stated:

We all work together and if we have an issue, we just talk about it and move on. We have a good relationship with all of us together in the building that we feel -- that you can say, "Wow, I like that.", "Can we change this?" Everybody just accepts and goes with the team you know. You might not agree with somebody else's opinion. But we agree to disagree.

When asked why these relationships existed within professional learning communities, there were varied answers collected from the data. Some teachers replied that norms promoted professionalism and respect. Teacher I stated:

I think that's where maybe your norms for your team comes in handy because if you approach it in that way, it doesn't become personal I guess. Because if you approach it from the way these are the expectations that we set at the beginning. So, we need to make sure that we're following them. Then it doesn't become at like in a personal attack for you to that person.

In addition to team norms, teachers attributed success to having well-structured team agendas. It was stated that these agenda kept everyone on task and held them accountable. Teacher J commented, "we have our agenda that we make sure that everybody's bringing what they're supposed to bring and staying on task. That's helps since we've established that. There's documentation on when you're not doing something."

Veteran teachers commented to the value that change brings to the school through collaboration and sharing of new ideas. One teacher related their team's success to the change and momentum brought by the PLC initiative. Teacher G stated:

I just think we're all open right now to new ideas, and trying to figure out what's best for our students, trying to figure out how we can become better teachers, because I've realized that over the years you teach for 20 years and you kind of do get stuck in "This is how I'm going to teach something", and then you have newer teachers coming in and they have new ideas, or professional development comes in and you find out something new. One teacher was not as excited to try a new initiative but is willing to participate for the

team. Teacher F stated:

I truly believe in my PLC. I work, I'm a team player and the purpose of that is to know better what we're doing and I'm going to do whatever it is that I got to do to get better. So I mean that just what I've come to the conclusion that I just got to work with it and not against it.

Still there are experienced teachers that shared their enthusiasm that PLCs have made a huge difference in team culture. Teacher I expressed her excitement by adding:

The biggest difference that comes to my mind is just with our regular team meetings in the past, it focused more on just your core classes mainly and with the professional learning communities in the professional development that we've received with that were pulling in all of the teachers. Every teacher, no matter what they teach and to watch that process and to hear from these teachers, it's amazing, and it kind of makes you wonder why we didn't, we should've been doing this all along but getting insight from those teachers, you've really learned a lot.

Teachers found that all members of the faculty were not fully included in the team process. Recommendations lead to additional inclusion of non-core teachers to gather input to team decisions. The results of this change in team dynamics had a positive effect on issues throughout the building. Teacher I stated:

I think just trying to engage everyone in the discussion. Sometimes, I think we focus more on our core class issues by instinct. But realizing that teachers that may not teach a core class, they may have a lot of more students and how they manage that higher number of students can be very beneficial to how we manage our smaller class assets as well.

Teachers believe that the success or failure of team decisions is not only due to the values and respect shown for each member within a professional learning community, but that attitude played a big part in team dynamics. Teacher A states, “When we meet, and there's a lot of negative comments, a lot of complaining. That kind of drags me down and I don't want to be there, I don't want to hear it, I want to separate myself from that”. Teachers throughout the building are members of several teams, grade level and content. Teacher A commented to the differences of her teams by saying, “one team I'm very comfortable with, for the most part we're positive, we share, we can communicate well. On another team, very negative, very complaining, I don't feel like we will move forward very well”. When asked why she felt that way, Teacher A elaborated:

People's attitudes, it's going to make a difference. If there's a lot of people that are negative it's going to be hard to move forward. If they think it's dumb or stupid or a waste of time then we're not going to be productive, if they lean the other way well then, we'll be productive.

Teacher B found that team size played a part in creating an atmosphere that was positive.

She stated:

With my content team more than my grade level team, I think my content team is smaller with only three of us, it's just closer. With my grade level team, it's a larger group so if so many people start talking, you're not going to get everything done. So, I find that also a little hindrance because you want to be positive, but we got things we got to do. You don't want too much talking to go on.

Leadership

Teachers were asked to elaborate on some of the reasons why they felt their professional learning community teams were successful. A third theme that arose from this question was that of supportive leadership. Teacher D stated, “I feel like our administration at this building is very good about asking our opinion and listening to our opinion and taking that into account”. When

asked how her administration provided various supports, Teacher D explained, “We have meetings a lot of times to talk about it or through email or lots of different ways”.

By scheduling time for teams to collaborate, building leadership was able to give more support as indicated by teacher comments. Teacher F stated:

It improves our students’ academics and I'm just a firm believer in that. I mean I think if we weren't allowed to do that, if we weren't allowed to meet and share and collaborate, it's just one man doing one thing and another man doing another.

Teacher E commented about this scheduling support stating:

Because of our schedule change. I think that changed a lot because we didn't get to meet as a team for the first part of the year. That really helped last year because of we all got to make on a regular basis. I think we were more in touch with what was going on with every student that we taught when we met.

Being able to stay focused is a result noticed by one teacher. This teacher found that she was also more prepared due to the change in team schedules. Teacher I stated, “Because we get to see and meet more often. So, it's easier to go from every other week, remembering what you've discussed and bringing the materials and be prepared, than ideas from a month to month basis.”

A second type of leadership emerged from the interviews that teachers found to be important and necessary for professional learning communities to be successful. Shared leadership through various teams was found to be a component mentioned. Teacher G stated, “it makes me want to be a better leader, I don't want to just say I'm the literacy team leader, I want to make sure that I'm doing what I need to be doing to help them become better teachers”.

Adding more clarification of this shared leadership, Teacher F said:

I think respect is a factor. I think that the desire to want your children to succeed is a very big mitigating factor. You as yourself want to succeed. I think its determination is satisfaction in knowing that your providing the opportunity for us is a fact. I think that we all play a part in having successful collaboration in PLC's and things like that.

There have been some challenges to creating a culture of shared leadership.

Accountability issues were noticed in teams where members failed to complete tasks and how it affected the team. When asked to give examples of how this shared leadership effected outcomes within the school Teacher B said,

Sometimes, they haven't been successful if some of the teachers aren't doing their reading assignments and following through with what the reading material says to do. You share ideals but sometimes there's no following through to make sure accountability is done, to making sure the accountability and that teachers are actually doing what the ideals shared to do in a team are suggested to do.

Professional Development

One of the ways support is given to educators is to provide professional development that is relevant to the needs of teachers. Teachers were asked to elaborate about this professional development and the impact that it had upon learning and instruction. Teacher C stated, “when I look for professional development, I'm trying to think about how that could work in my class, depending on whether it's some type of computer. Something that we might use with technology or something of that nature”. Teacher A stated:

I try to take as many content things that I can, and a lot of time professional development is not oriented towards content, it's more towards pedagogy. I know I need some pedagogy, I get some good ideas from them, but I also feel like if I don't know my content extremely well and beyond what I need to know to teach my students, I'm probably not making connections that I need to be.

Other teachers commented on the value of professional development in helping them grow as teachers. These teachers thrived on the change that professional development offered in helping them meet the changes in their students. Teacher F stated:

It plays a great role because things change daily. There're different techniques, different strategies that can be used and if we're not continually growing as a teacher then we're not able to reach our kids at their needs, at their point of needs. I think professional development is very important factor because it continues to grow us. With that professional development, it showed me what key points I needed to focus on and how I

needed to use that to my advantage in teaching. I think that the math professional development that I take is strong in helping me to teach.

One teacher commented to the value it had in updating her practices and was a motivating factor to make change. Teacher I said:

Just being able to have Professional Development to update us on those changes and just have a refresher, it hadn't been long since I've been out of college. But even just a refreshment on assessment or classroom management is always good to just update you and kind of get you motivated and resorted I guess.

Another teacher viewed professional development as a tool crucial to be a life-long learner. Teacher J stated:

Well, it's crucial. As a teacher, you have to constantly be a learner. You can't just get out of school when you're done. You have to constantly go back in a lot of things and because everything changes. And you can't just stay stagnant. You have to be willing to change with the times, and when things changed, you need to go back and get educated on what has changed that you can best benefit your kids.

During the study, extensive professional development was given to staff on professional learning communities. This consisted of concepts about PLC specifics and content related learning within teams. Teachers were asked to give their perceptions of the quality of this professional development and the effectiveness when given as a team effort. Teacher C stated:

We're all obviously in there together. So, if there's a question about something or how we're to take that information and then apply it. If I'm not sure about something or anyone's not sure, then we can ask someone else that's in our group because they've heard the exact same information. So, we're able to take that and apply it.

Just being able to compare experiences with teachers was a benefit to teachers. Teachers commented that sharing information from professional development was more probable to take place when experienced collaboratively as a team. Teacher E stated:

You have to work together and you're all on the same page, you're all doing the same thing. Whereas, if you just go to a workshop in the summer and maybe some of the other teachers went but not all, and sometimes none of the other teachers go, you don't really ever get an opportunity to share that with the other ones.

Professional development was presented to teams of teachers that share the same content but at different grade levels. Alignment of curriculum had previously been shared among the different grade levels, but it lacked comparison of assessment data each of those times. Providing training during this process allowed teachers to make connections when planning curriculum and lesson units. Teacher G commented about team training saying:

I think it was better as a team, because when we were in that meeting we found out a lot of things that the sixth grade was doing, that we didn't know they were doing they didn't know what the seventh grade was doing, we found out that our kids all had scored the lowest and pretty much the same area on ACT Aspire. Whereas if we had not met together and we actually sat down, and we're planning our units together because she was walking step by step through working our units, and it was just because I teach seventh and eighth. So, it was good for me to be there with the seventh-grade teacher, and the eighth-grade teacher. And the eighth-grade teacher and I were like "Oh, we're going to teach this together", and seventh grade was like "We're going to teach this together" when we normally do not get to do that.

Teachers shared that this team training made sense when striving to provide consistency throughout the building. Teacher I stated:

I think that helps with the consistency. If we're getting professional development as a team, then we can implement that as a team whether it's from classroom to classroom or content to content. I think that helps our students. I believe they thrive on consistency just like we do.

Teachers found this to benefit student but were still concerned about providing the same consistency of instruction due to changes in the master schedule. Taking a team approach, professional development was provided to address this concern. When asked how team professional development effected content, Teacher J stated:

She [trainer] showed us how to use things. Really look at essential standards and pick what we could use and break it apart and find learning targets to make sure we're covering what we need to cover and not spending so much time on things that really aren't that important. Because everybody else might change schedules, they didn't lose anytime. But math lost half of our teaching time for the year. Because math was always double blocked every day for an hour and a half. And now, we have them every day. But we've always had them every day. But now, we only in every day 45 minutes. Whereas,

we have them every day for an hour and a half for the last 15 years. So, her coming in and showing us how we can do that and scale things down.

Throughout the study, professional development was provided on various topics designed to help teachers improve as a professional learning community. Scheduling professional development was considered as individual or team events depending on time available and the topic being presented. When asked what was more beneficial, Teacher D stated, "I think a team, going with your team member, because while you're there you can process that information together and think "this is something we want to use" or "this is how it applies to us". Teacher F commented:

It's better when it's more people working together because you get to experience how because -- okay let me use one example, your classroom, you have different types of personalities, different types of children, different types of learning styles and if we're working together in all those different types of thing or within our personal development then I can see, "Oh she learned this, this way." Or, "Oh he did this different, he did it." I can see that and be able to use that within my classroom.

Providing professional development may have hinderances and negative consequences when certain elements aren't given attention. Agendas that provided clear guidance about expectations and team norms were useful in curtailing off-task activities that caused distractions during team events. Teacher J stated:

It's effective when everybody comes prepared and listens. Sometimes, it can be ineffective when you have people that are scattered and not listening during the meetings. But other than that, yes, effective. I mean, it's better to have team do it because then you can balance ideas off each other and how we can make it work. Whereas if you just go by yourself. And everybody's getting the same information.

One remedy for this dilemma may be found within setting norms within teams prior to training events. Teacher A added:

The negative to that is that sometimes we get to talking and we don't get a whole lot done, because we've got-- like if we're instructed to produce a product, well then we're constantly asking questions and we don't ever get the product done so sometimes I feel like "okay show me what I need to do, then let me go work by myself".

Past Influences and Current Realities

The last theme to develop from transcribed interviews was teachers' past influences and their current realities. Interview questioning was designed to investigate teacher experience and background to determine the effects upon teaching, and the current realities that teacher held about professional learning communities.

When asked about personal experiences that teachers found to be influential, there were many varied responses. Some teachers attributed their choices to past childhood experiences with family members or teachers that had an impact on them. Teacher D stated, "I always wanted to be a teacher. When I was a kid I had great teachers. I loved to learn, I loved school, I loved reading and I just always wanted to be a teacher. It was my dream job". Teacher B stated:

A friend of my mother was a teacher and she saw that teaching desire in me. In Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, she would let me help her classes when I was just nine years old and I went back every time to help her teach Vacation Bible School and from then on I just decided I was going to become a teacher.

Teacher J also elaborated on childhood experiences that affected her life at an early age:

I just come from my education background. My Mom didn't teach but she used the Superintendent's Secretary. So, I grew up in schools my whole life like being around teachers. I wanted to be a teacher since I was five. [chuckles] The very first paper I ever wrote was when I was in first grade, I think I wrote that what I wanted to be, and it was a teacher. It never changed.

Another teacher mentioned that a former teacher not only had an influence on her choice to become a teacher, but also her choice of subject matter. Teacher H stated:

I had-- Well, one high school, one junior high English teacher who made me really fall in love with English so when I graduated that's when I decided to get my English degree. I really didn't plan on teaching at first. I kind of just got it, just because I loved English.

Some teachers made these choices later life as adults. Influences ranged from one person to the next, but they all had the commonality of having jobs that influenced other children's' life's. Teacher E stated:

I originally started at a children's home, a local children's home here and I asked to become their teacher I set up their on-campus school and they liked the way I was running it and they wanted me to find out how to become the teachers. So, I said, "Well, okay", and I looked into it and found out I could take a couple of classes and get certified through the certification program, and I did. I've been teaching ever since.

Another teacher had not decided until after attending college classes. She was influenced by her college professor and his ability to teach. Teacher G stated:

I went back to college at 27 not really knowing what I wanted to do, and I had a college professor young guy, younger than I was actually, and the way that he taught class and everything I was not really sure what I wanted to do. But one day I was like, "I want to teach, and I want to be a teacher just like him because I love the way that he taught." I think the fact that I was an English major with a secondary education minor, I was exposed to a lot of classic literature, I had to take composition classes, I took grammar classes, and so a creative writing and all of those things helped me in my classroom, whether if I had been just an education major with an English minor I wouldn't have had that exposure.

One teacher was honest in conveying that her main focus was the schedule teachers had.

Teacher C stated:

If I'd be really honest, back 26 years ago, I liked the schedule of being a teacher. I liked all the benefits that you have as far as summer's off and those kinds of things, and I did enjoy working with children.

When asked to relate their past experiences with how it affects them as a teacher, participants could relate their current practices to early influences. Teacher A stated, "I think those experiences at my elementary level have stayed with me. I'm still not extremely confident in a lot of my skills. I still think I have the ability to do what everybody else does. Even though I do but I don't have that confidence. I don't feel confident that I can do it a lot of times lot of times." Teacher C stated:

I think just in seeing the progression from kindergarten to first grade to all throughout, all the way up to 6th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade, it lets me see how you build on a foundation with whatever it is you're teaching. You have to have a foundation, and so just trying to incorporate that, what you learn about the diversity of children and how they learn, and just the basic knowledge that they've got to have to progress.

Teacher D stated:

Well, I think experience is invaluable as a teacher and every year you learn something new and you learn a better way to do it and you change something every year. I'm a more efficient teacher I think and because of my experience I know what to look for and a little more of the signs and what-- if a student's doing this I can catch on quicker, it might mean that they're not understanding.

Teacher D also stated about team experience:

I've always worked in a team. I've never been a singleton or whatever they call them. In my whole 12 years I've always worked with a team of English teachers. I think having that team there to bounce ideas off of or to ask their opinion is really wonderful because especially as a beginning teacher, when I had no clue what I was doing, some of those more experienced teachers were able to help me and give me ideas and guide me through my first years.

Teacher I commented:

I think we can all think of one person, one teacher or administrator that's kind of shaped our life that we've looked up too, and I hope that one day, some of my kids can look back and feel the same way about me.

Teacher H had a similar experience stating about her influential teacher, “And I can still call her today like I ask her a question last week about writing a sonnet. So, she still answers questions for me.”

When teachers were asked to relate their experiences of professional learning communities, various responses indicated concerns that were mixed. Of previous team meetings, Teacher F stated, “when we were having our team meetings last year, we were discussing different students. We were discussing how we need to do this different or do that different and we were able to take the scores that we've gotten in the rooms that we were taking look at those and say, "Okay, we need to do this. We need to focus on this. We need to focus on this. We need to focus on this”. She also added, “I haven't really had really have bad experiences because like teaching and seeing my numbers each year and how much children are growing from the previous year to the year that they were with me, to me that affects me”. Teacher B stated:

That's good stuff but you wish you had more time to do it all. It would help give more time for collaboration, common assessments, unpacking essential skills, we just need more time to do it. But I am a little scared whether the teachers will bite into it and keep it up because the first year is always the toughest.

One teacher had mixed feeling about the current practices of team meetings. She felt that personal relationships had diminished due to the scripted nature of the meetings. Her feelings were that free discussion was more desired to talk about student issues instead of just basing decisions on data. Teacher D stated:

I think this year the meetings are more focused on student data and you're trying to pinpoint "what did we do to make them learn this" and "what did you do differently than I". They're just more specifically focused this year. I don't mean more focused, I kind of mean-- I don't want to say it's more scripted but we're giving things to talk about a lot of times and focus on these things instead of us just saying "this is what's happening, this is what we need to talk about". The focus is nice to say "okay, let's do this" but sometimes it's nice to have a little freedom.

When questioned further about her recommendations, this teacher elaborated on concerns that the professional development this year, on professional learning communities, was beneficial but overwhelming. She was excited about the prospect of change that the training brought to her team but suggested that it be given at a slower pace. Teacher D stated:

I've been to really great PD that I've used right off the bat and I've been to some PD that either it was too much too fast, and I just couldn't grab onto something from that or I felt like it wasted my time. The PD this year I feel like has been good. Some of it is too much too fast and I've been a little overwhelmed but a lot of it this year has been, I feel like it's good things, good teaching practices and good ideas. There's a lot of things going on this year that have me worried about the success. The time and a lot of behavior things that have gone on and I mean, I'm hoping it's successful. I'm just being honest with you.

Another teacher felt the same about the amount of training that was given this year. Teacher E included, "other than having to learn new strategies, I really think it's good but it's just so much at one time. I think we can learn it if we slow down. We're slowing down now but at first, we felt overwhelmed".

Other teachers were optimistic about the direction in which team were going to make improvements. Teacher F said, “I think it has provided more structure. It's given us more of a foundation, it's telling us what we need to do with the foundation that we have”. Teacher G also stated:

I just say I am hopeful that we do reach the level of PLC that Solution Tree wants us to get to, right now it seems kind of muddled and it seems like a far off target, but if we can get it to work the way that it's supposed to work I think it will benefit everybody in the long run.

Focus Group

Focus Groups were conducted with 6 certified educators from the middle school staff and were interviewed on a voluntary basis. Participants represented an equal balance of teachers from the existing PLC teams within the middle school. Participants in this study are identified as; Teacher A, Teacher B, ... etc., as agreed upon by approved IRB protocols. The demographic characteristics of the teacher sampling varied in multiple areas which included experience, content, and educational level. Professional content areas included the four core content areas in addition to representation from courses in the electives.

Focus group discussion was conducted in an agreed setting to provide a comfortable and secure environment that would allow them to speak openly and honest. This was designed to be informal and conversational in nature to elicit answers that would indicate the participant's intrinsic feelings and beliefs about their professional learning community and teams. A digital recorder was used during the focus group and transcriptions were made from the recorded conversation. Participants were able to review their transcribed information in order to correct, retract, or add any additional information to clarify the data collected. All recordings were kept confidential throughout the study and opportunity to withdraw their statements as stated in chapter 3 of this dissertation and IRB protocols approved by the University of Arkansas.

Open-coding was conducted and analyzed to identify outstanding descriptors from direct quotes of questions asked during focus group discussion. These quotes and codes were transferred to an Excel document and categorized by like concepts. These descriptors are triangulated with data retrieved from interviews and documentation for comparison as summarized in chapter 5 of this manuscript.

Questions were designed to elicit group discussion about experiences found within team efforts to incorporate professional learning communities within this middle school setting. Each question and answer were analyzed to indicate analysis of effectiveness of this initiative and information pertinent to creating student growth through the use of professional learning communities. When asked to explain their experiences of professional learning communities and how it has affected their ability to teach within their area of content, the focus group was eager to respond about influence of this process. Teacher A commented:

We actually have a good PLC group within our content area. So, since day one teaching in my content area and that enabled me to-- when I get stuck somewhere-- to reach out to members of this PLC and get ideas, get different lesson plans, templates, websites, all different things.

Teacher B elaborated further that job-embedded training would benefit reaching out to less experienced teachers to provide assistance. She said:

This also helps new teachers that come in also and say, "Hey here's some resources to start you all. If you get stuck, reach out to them". But then with the concept the PLC, we can also ask. Just being able to reach out and say, "I need help". Cause not a lot of people do that, they're not comfortable doing that.

One teacher related her experience to a past profession where she served as a manager of employees. Her previous experiences in communication were common with practices that she used in professional learning communities. Teacher C said:

I was a divisional manager before I became a teacher and I had several

employees and I learn how to work together as a team because we have a lot of different personalities A lot of different things. Within that team and everybody has to be able to flow together and he can't work against his own. Everybody needs to work together. And I learn how to communicate. How to talk. How to encourage. How to uplift, how to, you know just to keep my team cohesive. So, with PLCs you know it's the same concept. Everybody works together. Everybody plays apart. Everybody has to be heard. I am a firm believer in hearing what I say, in listening. You know you cannot listen to me if you are talking. So, I think that plays the big part in the PLCs.

Based upon the discussion, overarching elements that described teachers' views were centered around collaborative team efforts to share ideas and workloads. Through statements made, teachers within professional learning communities can share resources, lesson plans, and consolidate their efforts more effectively. Using effective team dynamics, instruction and curriculum indicate positive benefits from these team efforts.

Teachers were then asked to explain some of the significant factors that may support or hinder this professional collaboration. Some teachers spoke about the support that was given to them through this process. Teacher B replied:

I think just working with people that have different years of experience, levels of experience. I value that and gain insight from them that have different levels of experience than you do. More seasoned teachers can offer something that maybe you don't know as a new teacher. Or a new teacher can offer something that's new and exciting that an older teacher may not know. You got to be able to accept that change.

This statement was supported by Teacher D when she added:

We as new teachers, sometimes we are afraid to ask questions because you don't want to appear dumb or appear like you don't know your stuff. But we really sometimes don't know our stuff. I mean you know stuff shared in PLCS. It's really good in that aspect, we are able sit down with people that are going to the same thing that we are going through.

Teacher F reflected upon years when she was new to the teaching career and the lack of support that was given. Her comments were:

When I started teaching I was basically thrown into the fire and said figure it out. I used to agree, and I didn't know what I was doing. And I did not have the support that there is now. And I can tell the difference between those first couples of years when there's no support and the amount of support now. It's tremendous and I think that we have to be

able to help everybody. We call it cross-curriculum, it doesn't work if we don't have a PLC.

Another teacher agreed that teaming in professional learning communities provided support crucial in the school. She even added that failure would ultimately occur without these supports. Teacher C said:

I believe I said this yesterday, that we have to work together because if we don't work together, we're going to fail. We're set up for failure. And then if we don't encourage each other, we're set up for failure. You have to surround yourself with people that are going to bring you up. And not constantly put you down. I mean that's crucial.

Support through professional development was provided within content teams. She felt that was needed to provide clear guidance about differentiation strategies. Teacher A said:

Ms. Nancy came in and she taught us differentiation, different strategies that we can use to reach all of our kids. That was something that, you know we can hear differentiation all the time. We need to differentiate. We need to differentiate. We need to differentiate. But nobody is really telling you what you do to differentiate. And she came in and she broke it down and was able to tell us, you do this, but this certain group kids. They're so many different ways that you can reach every child and that was enlightening for me.

Another within the group felt that it was not only important to differentiate, but it was just as important to reach the other students that are often forgotten. Teacher E said:

The different learning strategies that I can use to, you know, help reach my kids. Because there are different levels of children. That sometimes we forget how we show no more focus of some the higher-level kids because they got it. So just give them some work to do and then those we really want to kind of focus are those ones that are slower cause we are trying to get to them, where the middle children are being left. Because we must also focus on the lower children and it's just not fair. We are not reaching them all. So that's for me.

Concepts gathered from group responses indicated that teachers that met in professional learning communities were able to provide mutual support for each other. Analysis of the data reflects a high value for team effort versus working in isolation. Responses also place value upon job-embedded professional development designed to meet the needs of every child through the team efforts of professional learning communities.

Participants were then asked to distinguish between the differences of past team meetings and teams designed with concepts of a professional learning community. Teacher F began by saying:

I think with just team meetings you lack focus, and you have to have that focus. You must be coming together with one main focus when your team meets. We were focused on more of our students on some behavior issues [in regular teams] rather than the learning, with PLC you have a goal.

Several teachers felt the establishment of team norms provided structure that guided teams with clear focus. Teacher B commented how norms provided structure and accountability. She said, “we remain professional. It’s part of being a professional, it’s part of being in a work environment. You have to remain professional. In my own PLC everyone’s well but the norms hold you accountable to being professional”. Another related team expectation to her classroom, Teacher E added, “it’s part of the instruction. You know we set norms for our kids. I mean you know they have to follow those norms just like we have to follow the norms”. Teacher C said:

You know you have set a norms and those type of things, whereas in a regular team meeting everybody just shoot from here, there and everywhere. But like I said PLC we are focused on one thing, like she said, and so there’s big difference between PLC and past teams.

Teacher A added the norms were established first within her team. She felt that this process created buy-in for teachers within the team. She replied:

When we go and decided on those norms as a collective group. We all have buy in. We did that at the beginning. They weren’t decided for us. As a team, we’re able to say these are the norms we’re going to follow in our meetings and it’s how we are going to conduct ourselves. I think it could be a mixture of both. Cause you have to be able to as individually to say, “I will do this” But then you’re held accountable to the group saying, “okay, as a group we’ll hold each other accountable also”.

Teachers clearly stated that the biggest difference between past team meetings and professional learning communities was the use of norms and rule to establish and maintain professionalism and focus of purpose. With the many personalities and experiences that each

team consists, agreed upon norms provide accountability to valuing each other and staying on task.

Being able to participate within professional learning communities brings shared ownership of decisions made by each team. When asked about the ability to voice their concerns, questioning focused on the ability to give input and the value of that input perceived by each team member. Teacher A felt the leader played a huge part with ensuring all members were valued. She said:

In our PLC team we talk, we discuss, we listen to one another. No, I don't see anything we would change about it because we respect one another. We respect one another's opinion. We all get along. I mean there is no animosity. There's no confusion. Everybody comes to do their job and when we get there the job has to be done, we have a leader and she keeps it that way. I think that's a lot that make its happen, is your leader. If you are a leader, it's one that does what they're supposed to do and stay on task, then the team will follow. But if you come in chaotic, your team is going to be chaotic. I think it's a lot of the leader's responsibility.

Teacher B mentioned that her team had conflict at times about decisions but everyone agreed for the most part. Everyone was allowed to give input to the group. She said:

We've been able to discuss a lot of what we've been working on, the smart goals and stuff. Like she said, there's always going to be that one personality that goes against the grain, but for the most part it's been really good. I mean everyone is able to speak. You know there may be on some discussion and you know not everyone might agree but between talking it out it's going to come around.

Teachers commented throughout the study on the professionalism the new process provided to their team. In comparison to past meetings, teachers felt communication has shifted from dysfunctional dialog to productive decision-making. Teacher D said, "I really don't know if it's disfunction. We had those negative meetings and you just got to have a good leader that says, "okay that's enough, let's move on" or "I respect your opinion but there's a norm". One teacher went further to say that disagreements are discussed but once team decisions were made, the team must honor that decision. Teacher E said:

When the decision is made they have to do it. We can agree to disagree. We are all adults but it's the job it's their to do it. Now there's something that beyond our realm making sure they do it and its just kind of the honor system, but it usually comes to you that they are not doing it, that is beyond our enforcement. But for the most part, most of the decisions or most of the things that we've talk about for the most part they can go along with just because we are all professionals and it's our job.

Caution was noted by one teacher who felt that negativity can lead to a non-productive team and cause animosity among its members. She said:

I think having those loose and tight elements we agreed to. You've got to work as a unit together because if not, I think you start getting separation and you'll fight against yourself. The first thing negative can start to rub off the others. It's kind of awful on that part. You don't think that much of a one person make that much of a difference but... Not only because you work so hard to do what you're supposed to do then the next person does it and that cause animosity. Because I've done what I'm supposed to do, and they can do what they want to do, now there's the problem. The coalition is broken because you know, people are upset.

Analyzing the effectiveness of professional learning communities can be difficult when teams are utilizing student learning to inform instruction but a dysfunction exists within the team. Evidence indicates that team members often share a value for each other's opinions but there are teams where integrity may lack when it comes to initiating team decisions. Respect for team norms and strong leadership holds members accountable for valuing participation in these decisions and honoring them through implementation.

When teachers were asked to differentiate between individual professional development and that provided to teams, patterns existed that are consistent with answers from the interviews. Teacher A began saying, "I think we're saying professional development as a team and that when we're all together that helps us to be consistent. I think we thrive on consistency and we can take the same strategies and implement them honestly". Teacher C followed by commenting:

I think we look more at what we need now as a team and then we try to find professional development that can fit that need. whether its individually or as a group, as a team not just looking at area of concern, areas of what we know, we need improvement and then

find it professional development in that whether it be from PLC coaches or from our cooperative, or there is someone in your own team that can provide that professional development.

Some teachers were not as enthusiastic about this type of professional development. They commented that lack of opportunity created this slight doubt but they were willing to try.

Teacher E said, “just because it’s a newer concept to us and it’s just something I mean its I heard that its wonderful but I’m not comfortable with it yet because I haven’t seen it”. Teacher B said:

Professional development is a little bit difficult for our CTE area because a lot of times we are learning assessments that have nothing to do with us. I would love to be able to sit in and understand some of the PLC content training in English or Math because we are able to take some of those things concepts or ideas and say, “okay they’re going to be working on that, we can tie in something with ours that is important.”

Analysis showed that teachers favored team professional development for the consistency of practices and implementation within content areas and the provision for common understanding within their teams. Other teacher input showed that an insufficient knowledge base to fully support team professional development but desire to implement cross-curricular activities was desired as was the desire to be a part of the professional learning community process.

The last question asked of this focus group dealt with the existing success they’ve experiences within their learning community. Teacher A said, “we are way more focused on the start of a task. If there's something that we can’t get through, we just save it for the next meeting instead just trying do things at one time”. Teacher B added, “I think that we’re data driven now. Not that we weren’t before, but we are more focused now”. Teacher D finished by saying:

We’re focus on the data and the communication piece because the norms. The norms helped to create an easier line of communication within each other. If you have a question you know who to go to. You go to your facilitator.

Elements that teachers attributed to the success of their professional learning communities centered upon a team that was well focused on student data and guided by norms. Leadership is also indicated as one of the factors that support these teams.

Observations and Minutes

The purpose of the conducting observations was to gather information about the characteristics of professional learning communities in the middle school and decision-making processes of each community. Observations of professional learning communities provided rich data to inform the case study about group interactions and decisions. Observations and minutes from team meetings are relevant to informing this case study of practices relevant to student learning and characteristics that promote continuous improvement of leadership capacity among administrators and professional learning communities. For the purpose of this study, the researcher took a non-participatory role while physically observing professional learning communities when the sole purpose was informing this research study.

The researcher was able to observe team meetings with professional learning communities over a period of over two years. The various teams observed ranged from the Building Leadership Team (BLT), the grade-level teams ranging from grade six through eight, and the content teams throughout the building. During this time, minutes were collected from various team meeting to analyze for successful implementation of teacher-led initiatives that influenced student learning, and for evidence of change over the course of the study.

During the past three years, the middle school has utilized the ACT Aspire summative assessment as required by local and state policies. At the beginning of this study, professional learning communities were recently implemented within this middle school setting. Results of state testing reflected a significant difference in results between grade levels. Over the course of

two years, professional development has provided support to improving professional development practices to inform teachers and improve student learning. Sharing of common language, team practices, and relevant student assessment data have been a focus of transformation for all members of the middle school staff. Table 3, *ACT Aspire Trends* indicates trend data that reflects that efforts to improve school-wide have been successful but are not yet consistent. Additional comparisons of school assessment data with average state results reflect a significant shift in growth with upper grade level content over the course implementation of professional learning communities. Comparison of minutes are necessary to inform the researcher of best practices that have utilized within these various teams.

Table 3 *ACT Aspire Trends*

		6th grade	7th grade	8th grade		6th grade	7th grade	8th grade	
English	2015-16	74%	75%	67%	Math	2015-16	68%	46%	49%
	2016-17	82%	76%	64%		2016-17	69%	55%	36%
	2017-18	80%	84%	78%		2017-18	56%	51%	49%
Reading	2015-16	59%	32%	53%	Science	2015-16	59%	35%	40%
	2016-17	59%	42%	34%		2016-17	52%	43%	28%
	2017-18	52%	41%	55%		2017-18	50%	46%	47%

In addition to ACT Aspire Trend analysis, teams were able to compare grade level growth to state-wide data in order to reveal any growth patterns that were significant. Table 4 *School and State Comparisons* reflects the shift in growth over the course of two years.

Table 4 *School and State Comparisons*

	16-17		Difference	17-18		Difference	Movement	
	Grade	MMS		State	MMS			State
ELA	6	76	62	14	61	46	15	1
	7	57	55	2	52	44	8	6
	8	41	57	-16	56	48	8	24
Math	6	69	62	7	56	56	0	-7
	7	55	48	7	51	47	4	-3
	8	36	44	-8	49	46	3	11
Science	6	52	49	3	50	46	4	1
	7	43	44	-1	46	43	3	4
	8	28	42	-14	47	42	5	19
STEM	6	62	54	8	9	15	-6	-14
	7	49	43	6	16	19	-3	-9
	8	30	43	-13	16	17	-1	12

Observations of team meetings conducted in this study were in conjunction with minutes provided by each team leader. While the researcher was unable to attend every team meeting conducted over the duration of the research study, minutes of every meeting were reviewed by the researcher during this time. As a practitioner, the researcher provided feedback and support to teams throughout the building when not solely involved in conducting research for this study.

Minutes from grade level meetings reflect a transition from the topic of discussion throughout all three grades. Observation of minutes gathered showed this transition consisted of agenda format, development of team norms, establishment of goals, and accountability measurements build within the agendas and the minutes produced.

All teams have moved to a consolidated form of agenda for consistency. The development of this agenda was a formatted with the input of each team and finalized through the building leadership team which consisted of representation from each team. A sample of this agenda can be found in Figure 2 below.

Agenda - BLT-

Purpose Statement: <i>Provide guidance through collaboration to achieve high levels of student learning.</i>		Norms: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We are committed to working collaboratively and interdependently with proportionate participation. 2. We are committed to speaking in a professional tone. 3. We are committed to listening with intent and respect, and we will value what others say. 4. We are committed to staying focused and on topic. 5. We are committed to beginning meetings on time and ending meetings within a 70 minute time period. 6. We are committed to coming prepared and following through with agreed upon items. 7. We are committed to utilizing fist to five in our decision making process. 	
MMS SMART GOAL 2019			
By May 2019, -----will move --% of the student population below benchmark to Ready in all ACT Aspire tested subject areas.			
Attendance:		Scheduled meeting dates:	
Member name	Present/Absent		

Agenda Item		Date Started/completed	Outcome
Review Minutes from 9-6-18	Read minutes from previous meeting		
Vision Statement	MMS works collaboratively to establish a culture of high expectations & accountability for all. -This will be shared with staff and voted on		
Grading Practices	-MMS Teacher handbook: grading policy -TAC updated weekly -Tests graded in a timely manner -Failing students: phone call need to be made -At least 3 Tests each nine weeks (100 pts each)		

Figure 2 Agenda format used in team meetings.

Prior to the use of this agenda format, teams submitted minutes within word documents in narrative form or minutes weren't submitted at all. There was no correlation between any two agendas throughout the building. Information topics varied and lacked detailed specifics about educational outcomes or expectations. Present use of a consistent agenda format provides teams with direction, expectations, and accountability from each member of the team.

Observation of team meetings revealed various behaviors supportive of professional learning communities over the period of study. Differences appeared to be evident between the teams, especially at the beginning of this research study. Sixth grade team meetings have been conducted with the most consistency over the period of this study and beyond. It was also noted that similarities began to emerge after professional development was provided that set expectations of teams that function in a professional learning community. It was also noted that many of these characteristics were already established within sixth grade practices. These characteristics consisted of; team expectations, mutual respect and professionalism, and instructional practices based upon student data. Observations of other teams were often unfocused and inconsistent with lack of participation in some cases due to scheduling conflicts that made it difficult to collaborate.

Summary

The focus of chapter 4 provided an analysis of the interviews conducted with participants, focus group discussions transcribed, and observations/minutes of team meetings conducted throughout the study. Demographic information was provided about the school and the participants of this study. Analysis of each datum was coded and categorized utilizing conceptual frameworks within the study design to ascertain existing themes existent within the perceptions of staff about professional leaning communities. Finally, findings were triangulated

for validity utilized in action research methodology for providing feedback and change within the context of this middle school environment.

Chapter 5 includes the researcher's interpretation of data gained by this study and includes research methodology of this study. It also includes answers research questions and recommendations for practitioners and further research study.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in middle schools. This research study's methodology was designed as a case study of the problem of practice. Using interviews, the researcher took a case study approach to having a deeper understanding of data coded from individual interviews and focus groups. Observations/team minutes were collected of PLC processes and instructional practices. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher's perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

Chapter 5 provides a description of the case study approach as it informed research and decisions made within the context of the study. A summary of the findings, interpretation of data, and application of guiding research questions are also provided. Finally, recommendations are made for practitioner and researchers.

Research Design

Techniques within this study included a case study approach, and triangulation of multiple qualitative methods to ensure validity and trustworthiness of data analysis. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study to inform the researcher of experiences that effect decisions within professional learning communities and build capacity among all stakeholders of these communities. Open-coding was conducted of interviews taken from the participants in this

research study. The researcher utilized computer software to organize data into groups and themes. Data was coded holistically in order to grasp the prevalent themes. First cycle coding in this manner provided the researcher with data imperative to second cycle coding and themes within professional learning communities. Rich qualitative inquiry guided depth-of-understanding for all stakeholders involved in making instructional decisions through interviews conducted throughout this study and ongoing professional development.

Professional learning communities presently use agendas to guide instructional decisions through a series of informational seeking questions. Information gained through the efforts of this study will provide professional learning communities with a better understanding of processes to empower members of these communities.

Summary of Findings

This research was designed to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in middle schools. Through the study of this middle school, categories and themes emerged that identified five areas that had a major influence upon decisions within professional learning communities that influenced student learning: curriculum, team dynamics, leadership, professional development, and past influences/current realities. Figure 3 is shown below as it is related to overall purpose of this study.

Each of these themes were analyzed were supported by open-coding data analysis and triangulation of all data gathered. Connection of themes were applied to research design to answer research questions and inform recommendations to educators and practitioners in the context of this study.

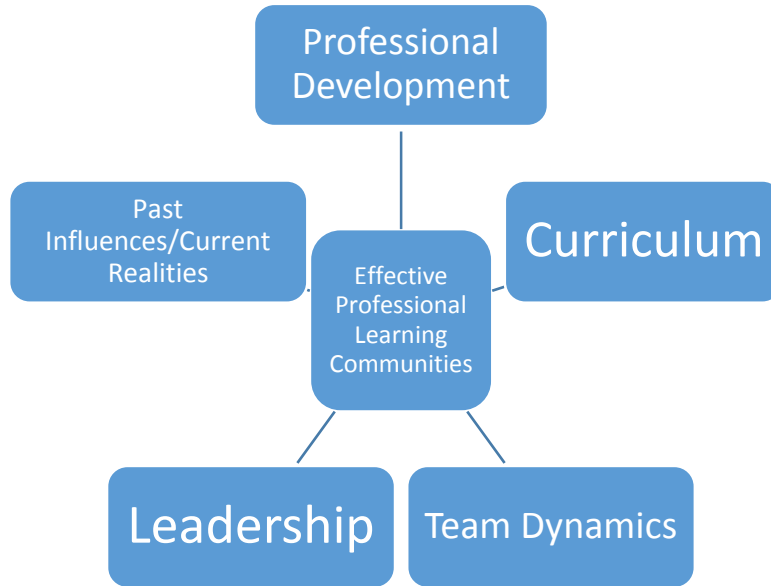


Figure 3

Application of Research Questions

The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the teacher experiences within professional learning communities, and what are the factors prevalent within these teams that influence student learning?
2. What are the teacher’s perceptions of highly effective professional learning communities?

Triangulation of data was conducted by gathered evidence in the form of: transcribed interviews, focus groups, and documentation from observations and team minutes. Themes found in each element were found to have connections to both research questions in this study.

Theme 1- Curriculum

Professional learning communities offer teams a structured focus upon discussions that influence student achievement. Meaningful collaborative efforts of staff utilize student data from formative and summative assessments to identify and implement interventions specific to children’s needs. Teachers stated in interview and focus group discussion that setting detailed

goals and identifying essential standards was instrumental in providing instruction that had a positive effect on instruction. These discussions were also noted in team agendas and minutes. They also stated that team efforts were preferred over working in isolation to share ideas and workload.

Differences between current practices and those of past team meetings were discussed by participants and noticeable in team agendas and minutes. Documentation reflected a more focused discussion using agendas focused on learning. Teachers also commented on these differences stating that there were less “bird-walking” and regular team meetings lacked focus.

Theme 2-Professional Development

Past professional development was conducted on an individual basis. With the implementation of professional learning communities, a grant provided highly effective training for staff. This professional development consisted of two types of training. School-wide training was conducted to promote a common understanding of the process and relevancy shared involvement. Content training was provided for content teams to develop aligned implementation of instructional strategies and interventions.

Teachers commented that being able to conduct this professional development as a team had a greater impact upon team efforts. They also stated that teachers were more willing to offer suggestions to each about instructional issues when learning occurred in this manner. By sharing ideas, teachers shared that identification of relevant professional development was more likely to happen.

Teacher stated that professional development can be ineffective as a team when people are not prepared and not listening during these events. One of the positives noted was that professional learning communities promote job-embedded training based upon data and

professional development that was relevant to that information. Teachers felt this characteristic promoted continuous growth and prevented them from becoming stagnant.

Theme 3-Team Dynamics

Significant differences in teams existed prior to the implementation of professional learning communities. From observations early in the study, the researcher noted more professional and structured meetings being conducted on some teams. These discussions were also more focused on students and informative to changing what teachers did. Other teams lacked focus and were oftentimes chaotic with little to nothing accomplished when these meetings concluded.

Some of the conversations from teacher interviews and from focus group discussion reflected to the differences noted since they implement structured agendas and set norms. They stated the norms kept each member focused and professional. Participants from highly effective teams shared that they always respected each other and valued each other opinions. It was also commented that differences also promoted and participation from all team members and provided mutual accountability to tight elements agreed upon by each other.

Theme 4-Leadership

The theme of leadership was commented on by several teacher during interviews and during focus group discussion. Teachers stated that collaborative time was highly valued and leadership provided support by making time within the schedule for their teams to meet and discuss student learning. They also commented on the powerful change that professional development had on their team and were thankful for support from their leadership. Comments showed that teachers felt good leaders supported their team efforts through these means and communicated often with them about their instructional and team needs.

Agendas and minutes also reflect a shift in decision-making processes within teams that utilized participatory leadership. This type of leadership produced better results in test data versus teams that lacked shared ownership. There were also indications that shared decision-making processes promoted mutual accountability of each member.

Theme 5-Past Influences/ Current Realities

Opening conversations were held during the interviews that consisted with questions that asked about personal experiences and influences. Teachers spoke freely about the early influences that directed their professional choices to become educators. These influences were based highly upon family members input, the impact of a past teacher, and even personal failures that impacted their life's. When asked if this had an impact upon their current practices, many said that it impacted how they related to students and how they wanted to be remembered.

Statements throughout the interviews and during focus group discussion revealed some anxiety within teacher about professional development processes. Some comments that teacher sometimes felt overwhelmed by the process but were still excited about the changes made. Some concerns were that a few individuals may not do their part and that it wouldn't be fair. Teachers also commented that changes showed that team meetings were more focused and gave them more direction than they had in the past.

Recommendations for Practice

Based upon the findings from this study, several recommendations are suggested by the researcher when implementing and sustaining professional learning communities within school settings. Professional development of these learning communities should consist of school-wide training and teams of teachers that focus upon PLC procedures and concepts of effective content training. Members of the leadership team attended seminars on professional learning

communities and consultants were brought on-site to give specific training for all stakeholders within the building. When possible, these resources provide a foundation for establishing sustainable and effective teams. In order to maintain a plan within budget constraints, key members of the leadership team should be trained to provide ongoing staff development. These plans should include training for new employees about the concepts and expectations of professional learning communities within each team. By providing training of professional learning communities, there is a common knowledge and language shared among all staff members. Ongoing professional development should consist of monthly book studies within specific teams or as a school-wide activity.

Teachers should be supported through effective training within content areas. This training was found to be beneficial when it was job-embedded and based upon relevant data about student learning. Depending upon this data, teachers would discuss relevant professional development to address learning needs. If data analysis is conducted in a timely manner, professional development may include workshops or peer observations on an individual basis. Teachers highly recommended that professional development within content be conducted with teams of teachers of the same subject. This would ensure that proper identification and implementation of essential learning skills are cohesively shared with all teachers. When it is not possible to provide training to teams of teachers, one or two members may attend training and share with others about team implementation of knowledge. Usually the content facilitator or team leader will guide these activities, but it can include any stakeholder with the skills or proficiency level to guide this professional development. The need for professional development of this nature should follow student assessments that can either be formative or summative.

Professional development based upon formative assessments may be needed on a monthly basis depending upon the frequency that these assessments are given.

Team dynamics played a vital role in results found to be present in highly functional professional learning communities. Close attention should be considered when developing teams and assigning roles within these teams. A leader should be assigned to each team who is able to maintain focus and encourage participation from every member. Agendas should reflect established norms that ensure meetings are being conducted with fidelity, and mutual respect and value is shared among its' members. Every member of the team has the responsibility to ensure the norms are maintained even though the team leader usually monitors and reports to building administration through the use of minutes. Accountability for success should be shared equally among the members of each team by utilizing participatory leadership. SMART goals should be established and reviewed through completion as reflected in minutes of team meetings. These goals should be monitored, shared, and celebrated with all staff and a regular basis.

Strong effective leaders are crucial to the success of professional learning communities. According to this research study, teachers commented on how important it was to have a leader that provided: clear and frequent communication, held each member equally accountable, and supported team decisions. They felt these qualities made the difference between weak and strong leadership. Leaders should provide clear guidance and communicate clearly goals and directions with staff. Tight elements are supported by leadership by holding everyone accountable to decisions made in school initiatives. Participatory leadership is highly recommended in making school decisions to create ownership of programs and initiatives. Leadership academies and training should be provided for school leaders consisting of both administrative personnel and leadership team members that guide other teams. This training should include leadership

principles and a focus on student achievement to drive the development and completion of team SMART goals.

Recommendations for Research

Based upon the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that further research be conducted in other schools to support and validate suggestions made from this study.

Implementation of professional learning communities within other schools of this district offer data rich environments for this research. Comparisons should be conducted with practices within these schools throughout the district. Studies should be conducted in other schools that reflect both similar and varied demographics to validate recommendations for sustainable professional learning communities.

At the beginning of this study, evidence indicated that some teams maintained a high level of effectiveness with positive results upon student achievement and other teams lacked these results. Team dynamics and members changed in every team throughout the course of this study and coinciding staff development being given on professional learning communities. As a result, consistent team practices and student achievement were affected positively throughout the school as reflected by state assessment data. Recommendation for further research in this area would be to determine how teams and student achievement would be affected with the placement of underperforming teachers in high performing teams or placing highly effective teachers as leaders of low performing teams.

Other recommendations for further research would include quantitative or mixed methods studies. Supporting data directly related to making changes within school-wide teams through professional learning communities would be directly related to specific change in each of the areas recommended in this study.

Conclusion

As an educational leader, the design of professional learning communities has been an interest of mine for over ten years. Before this study, team practices were implemented in this middle school setting using similar design and procedures for each team that was established. Varied results from the different teams left me wondering why some teams had a great impact on student learning while others continued to struggle.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of professional learning communities by comparing practices and strategies of content and grade level teams in a middle school. My intentions as a practitioner, and leader, is to empower teachers to engage in productive team practices as full stakeholders and knowledgeable professionals.

Being able to conduct a qualitative study through a case study allowed me to engage in deep conversations with teachers to find patterns in practices that made a difference in their ability to collaborate effectively with their peers in professional learning communities. Providing job-embedded professional development to teams of teachers and conducting in-depth interviews helped the teachers and staff of this middle school to transform perceptions about their teams and created a healthy value for each member's contributions. Sharing these thoughts through focus group discussion helped these teachers to understand the differences between effective team strategies and past practices that were preventing some teams from excelling as a productive professional learning community. Through sharing the results of this study, my intentions are to provide tools to build a system of practices for teachers to sustain powerful practices and promote teacher efficacy within professional learning community teams.

As a school leader, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to conduct this research during a time when intensive professional development was provided to these teachers focused

on professional learning communities. Utilizing a case study approach help me to observe this change process while gathering valuable perceptions from teachers going through this process. Being able to recognize emerging themes through open-coding had a great impact on me as a researcher. Further utilizing this method will help me to dig even deeper to analyze practices in teams and provide supports as a leader.

The duration of this study lasted longer than was intended. Changes in schedule and staffing prevented individual efforts to conduct research as timely as desired. However, my experience for having this delay has been enriched by the prolonged process by allowing a change to take place in teams of teachers that have self-awareness of the changes they have made. Evidence through this period has enriched feedback and created rich conversations that would not have otherwise happened. Reflecting upon the discussions with my professors, their advice to engage in this practice has developed valued meaning for me. This process alone will help me to provide guidance to educators and help them to develop similar skills for thoughtful conversations about learning and improvement.

As an educational leader, this study has helped me to develop research skills that will benefit my current school and help me to guide improvement efforts in other schools and districts throughout the state. Through this study, I've gained a better understanding of team decision-making processes that help to develop and maintain a highly effective professional learning community. This qualitative research has helped me to develop skills and to solve educational issues as well as engaging colleagues within this profession. As a retired member of the armed forces, I've developed a mindset that is to the point and mission oriented without concern for details. This process has helped me to grow past that mindset by looking deeply

within educational issues to analyze root causes and complete learning missions with effectiveness.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Pre-Questions

Information was collected via Google Form and was completed prior to the researcher conducting the personal interview.

1. Educational level
2. Years of teaching experience
3. Years within current district
4. Outside of your teaching/administrative duties, do you serve in your district in additional ways? (Options was provided)
5. What school demographics have you worked in prior to your current position?

Interview Questions

1. Describe the team structures in place at the school level.
2. How do these structures impact the success of teachers?
3. Does the principal actively participate as a team member?
4. Does the principal keep the focus of the school on instructional improvement?
5. As a teacher are you provided opportunities to voice your constructive critique of progress and suggest possible improvements?
6. What policies or practices are in place to support you as a learner and leader within your school?
7. What policies or practices are in place that hinder your success/access to being a learner/leader within your team/school?
8. What types of celebrations are held for individual, team and school success?
9. Besides the principal, what additional supports are available to assist new or struggling teachers?
10. Describe the difference between regular team meetings and professional learning communities?
11. What are some of the reasons your professional learning community has been either successful or not?
12. Do you feel your opinion is valued within your PLC? Why or why not?
13. How does professional development play a role in the effectiveness of your PLC?
14. What changes would you implement within your PLC to make it more effective?

Appendix B



To: James Kevin Hancock
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 12/14/2017
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 12/14/2017
Protocol #: 1710080384
Study Title: Refining Effective Instructional Strategies through Professional Learning Communities

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.