Implementing Change: A Case Study of Adaptive Leadership

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Implementing Change: A Case Study of Adaptive Leadership

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Adult and Lifelong Learning

by

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Abstract

Persistent low levels of student achievement is a concern that has been the focus of many school improvement initiatives. Research has demonstrated that Professional Learning Communities are an initiative that leads to improved academic outcomes. Additionally, research has demonstrated the importance of effective leadership for a change initiative to be successful.

Using the conceptual framework of adaptive leadership as applied to implement a school improvement initiative, this study was conducted to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed as a result of implementing professional learning communities in their school. The participants were instructional leaders who led schools participating in cohort one of the Arkansas Department of Education Professional Learning Communities Project.

The results indicated that when professional learning communities are only partially implemented, the components implemented are typically technical or structural and do not result in positive academic outcomes for students. The culture of the school must be developed and nurtured for successful implementation. The participants’ necessity to develop a shared leadership style was seen as an essential personal change. Participants also reported an increased understanding of how their behavior impacts the culture of the school. Instructional leaders will continue to be tasked with leading school improvement initiatives. This responsibility highlights the conclusion that successful implementation will require them to be open to learning how to implement adaptive change and, more importantly, recognize when the situation calls for them to utilize adaptive change skills.
Acknowledgements

Thomas Edison said, “The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense”. Thank you to my parents for instilling all three essentials in me.

Thank you, Dr. Kit Kacirek, for seeing me first as a person and second as a student. Your influence on my journey has far greater impact than academics. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Miller and Dr. Kenda Grover for serving on my dissertation committee and providing excellent feedback.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my sons. The greatest joys of my life are because I am their mother.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

In the late 1960s and 1970s, research exploring the variables that make a significant difference in student academic outcomes in K-12 public education produced highly controversial and contrasting results, bringing the practices of the U.S. educational system into sharp focus nationwide. In 1966 the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare commissioned the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (Coleman, 1966). This study posited that the student’s family background, coupled with socio-economic status influenced student success to a greater degree than the type of public school they attended, the teacher’s competence, classroom initiatives, and educational funding (Lezotte, 2001). To determine the validity of Coleman’s findings, the research of Ronald Edmonds, Larry Lezotte, and others, known as Effective Schools Research, conceded that family influence is essential in student success; however, other factors emerged as highly significant as well (Lezotte, 2001). The researchers compared two types of schools: successful schools, meaning those with children living in poverty yet learning at high levels, and schools that shared similar demographic characteristics (children living in poverty) but had low levels of student learning. The components unique to the successful schools set the standard for many schools in their education improvement initiatives (Lezotte, 2001). The components included qualities such as the leadership of the school principal, a pervasive instructional focus, an orderly and safe climate, teacher expectations for high levels of learning, and use of pupil achievement measures.

Based on these findings and policy-makers’ ongoing discussion of effective school measures, schools nationwide have introduced a myriad of initiatives to improve student outcomes. Built from Effective Schools Research, the professional learning communities (PLC) process is:
an ongoing practice in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action to achieve better results for the students they serve. The educators operate with the assumption that the key to improved student outcomes lies in continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 10).

Many schools in past decades have focused on a variety of variables on the process level that educators could easily maneuver and measure to improve student outcomes, such as adjusting course requirements and increasing accountability methods, especially for teachers. Although initiatives in some states have focused on improving classroom teaching methodology, others more recently have included the introduction of merit pay, charter schools, and vouchers. These broad initiatives have primarily emphasized compliance of federal, state, local mandates with marginal results at best (Schmoker 2006).

The majority of these initiatives have focused on improving input variables of schooling such as teachers’ pay, funding, teaching methodology, etc., as opposed to outcomes such as students learning at grade level, reduced absenteeism, and higher graduation rates. Notably, schools functioning as professional learning communities focus on outcomes and believe the primary function of schools lies in ensuring high levels of learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2016). Effective teaching remains critically essential, yet, education policy-makers and leaders advancing the concept of PLCs view quality teaching as a means to improve student outcomes rather than as an end in itself (DuFour et al., 2016).

The interest in PLCs emerged during the school reform movement of the 1980s as a result of pressure to determine the characteristics of effective schools (DuFour et al., 2008). The research of Rosenholtz (1985) found that learning-enriched schools exhibit two characteristics: they make collective commitments defining their specific behaviors and actions to meet their goal of improved student learning; and they work in a collaborative setting where staff interaction is characterized as “task focused, cooperative, and frequent” (Rosenholtz, 1985, p.
McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) later confirmed Rosenholtz’s findings, concluding the most effective schools, as well as departments within schools, operate as strong professional communities manifesting the following characteristics: shared beliefs, collegial relationships, collaborative cultures, ongoing inquiry about effectiveness, mutual professional support, and professional growth. Louis et al. (1996) cited that professional communities strive toward four elements of practice: shared values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, and reflective dialogue.

Additionally, research called for education leaders to advance improvements that generate learning-enriched educational experiences for students of all ages; for teachers as well as youth (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Educational circles have traditionally viewed teacher learning, commonly termed professional development, as separate from student learning. Education leaders typically conduct teacher learning off-site as a one-time event that draws teachers with a personal interest in the topic of the event or through a district initiative. Yet, research has highlighted deficiencies in this scenario. Working with the Gates Foundation to conduct a study of over 1,300 teachers regarding professional development, the Boston Consulting Group (2014), an international management consulting firm for a wide range of industries, found “the way in which schools and districts deliver professional learning is highly fragmented and characterized by key disconnects between what decision-makers intend and the professional learning teachers actually experience” (p. 3). Learning Forward, formerly known as the National Staff Development Council (2020), defines educator professional development as activities aligned with the following:

(a) an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators (including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, and as applicable early childhood educators) with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a
well-rounded education and to meet the challenging state academic standards; and (b) are sustained (not stand-alone, one-day, or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused (Learning Forward, para. 3).

As student learning and educational leader development are inextricably linked, professional learning communities place a heavy emphasis on both. Further, a culture of continuous improvement underscores PLC practices. Timperley et al. (2007) linked teacher involvement in a PLC that includes an extended duration of learning to a resulting high impact on student outcomes. Additionally, D’Auria (2015) wrote, “continuous improvement requires a process by which educators develop habits and routines for assessing their effect; they must learn from what is working, in what way and for whom, and then adjust their practice accordingly” (p. 54). PLCs usually focus on structures enabling ongoing, job-embedded adult learning. *Job-embedded* means instructor learning which typically takes place in the school, either in real-time or shortly before or after instruction. Job embedded learning is focused on issues of actual practice, and assesses students’ ongoing, continuous improvement (Learning Forward, formerly known as the National Staff Development Council, 2020).

In 2017, Arkansas began the process of utilizing PLC concepts and practices as a tool for improving student achievement (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017). The project began in 10 selected Arkansas schools, each chosen through a voluntary application process that added additional schools each successive school year. Currently, three cohorts of schools remain ongoing, with each cohort in either year one, two, or three of implementation. The schools participating in the project were selected through a rigorous application and evaluation process and represent all five regions of the state. Each school is matched with a certified PLC at Work associate from Solution Tree and receives intensive on-site support. During the first year they work to implement the process. The second year is focused on deepening the work including the
response to intervention process. Finally, the third year has a focus on sustaining the work including using assessments to inform instruction for student learning. Each school creates action plans that focus on increasing student achievement through aligned curriculum, formative assessment practices, and proven instructional strategies (Arkansas Department of Education, 2017).

As the term professional learning communities suffers from ambiguity in meaning (Dufour et al., 2016), the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) established a definition that would guide the state-wide initiative. Ultimately, the ADE selected Dufour et al.’s. definition of professional learning communities, defined as the following:

an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (Dufour et al., 2016, p. 9-10).

**Problem Statement**

Leithwood et al. (2004) cited the quality of teaching as the primary factor related to impact on student learning, ranking above effective leadership, although few documented cases exist of troubled schools turning around or making gains without a powerful leader directing the process. For example, Byrk et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of 477 elementary schools in Chicago, comparing 100 schools making significant gains in student achievement to 100 matched schools performing poorly. The researchers concluded that instructional leaders became the key change agents. For the purposes of this study the term instructional leader is referencing the principal of the school. In addition, Fullan (2016) wrote, “All major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change” (p. 74).
Supporting the common phrase *leadership matters*, Sarason (1996) noted the responsibility for implementing change always falls to the principal or instructional leader, regardless of where the change originated. Referring to principals as the “gatekeepers of change,” Sarason further highlighted the common scenario of school reform proving ineffective due to principals receiving inadequate training for change. In the years since Sarason’s research was published, some experts have maintained agreement with his conclusions. Fullan (2016) asserted, “What the principal should do specifically to manage change at the school level is a complex affair for which the principal has little preparation” (p. 75). Furthermore, leaders must exhibit a clear sense of their own values as well as the resoluteness and courage to model good practice (Stoll et al., 2006).

Turning to the topic of school leadership and student achievement specifically in Arkansas, researchers have considered the longstanding role of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019); beginning in 1969, the NAEP has measured what students in both public and private schools know and can critically apply in multiple subject areas, which currently includes reading, math, science, writing, arts, civics, geography, economics, U.S. history, and technology literacy. After a sample of students in every U.S. state and Puerto Rico take the assessment, the NAEP disaggregates and reports the results according to student groups, delineating gender, race, and school location. States use the results to inform educational practice and policy (NAEP, 2019). In comparison to other states, Arkansas in 2019 ranked near the bottom in student performance. The most recent results for math show Arkansas ranked number 47 of 51, with only 33% of fourth-grade, 27% of eighth-grade, and 18% of 12th-grade students scoring at or above the NAEP proficient level. With similar results in reading, Arkansas is ranked number 46 of 51, with 31% of fourth-grade, 30% of eighth-grade, and 33% of 12th-grade
students scoring at or above the NAEP proficient level. Even though Arkansas ranked higher in science at 39 of 51, student performance proved similar, with 33% of fourth-grade and 28% of eighth-grade students scoring at or above the NAEP proficient level (NAEP, 2019).

These data suggest a possible conclusion for Arkansas K-12 public schools: traditional strategies have not proved effective in bettering student outcomes. However, professional learning communities have shown positive results in advancing this goal. Banerjee et al. (2017) found that working collaboratively in a high-performing PLC reduces the negative effects of teacher dissatisfaction on student learning. Vescio et al. (2008) conducted a review of empirical studies regarding the impact on teaching practice and student achievement when schools implement PLCs and found “the collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in professional learning communities. The answer is a resounding and encouraging yes” (p. 87). Further, Sigurðardóttir (2010) confirmed a significant relationship exists between a school’s level of effectiveness (as measured through student achievement) and successful implementation of PLC concepts and practices. Finally, Reeves (2016) studied 196 schools with over 250,000 students and found when education leadership implement the Professional Learning Communities process with depth and duration, significant student achievement gains occur, specifically in reading, mathematics, and science. Further, the longer the school has been implementing the process, the greater the gains.

These studies highlighting the effectiveness of PLCs suggest when schools adopt the PLC process, the schools show increases in student achievement. While this finding may result, researchers should also consider a view citing inconsistencies. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) wrote the following evaluation:
Weak professional communities are bad, no matter how you cut it. Strong teacher communities can be effective or not, depending on whether they collaborate to make breakthroughs in learning or whether they reinforce methods that do not get results. In other words, when teachers collaborate to reinforce one another’s bad or ineffective practices, they end up making matters worse (p. 115).

DuFour and Reeves (2016) assert that professional learning communities around the world equate to “PLC lite,” describing the practice of education leadership renaming traditional faculty meetings and calling them professional learning communities while continuing to talk about the same issues that have no impact on student achievement. Further, Dufour et al. (2016) contended that the collaboration of a PLC proves effective in increasing student achievement only when the professionals remain focused on the right work, hence highlighting the need for an aware, pragmatic leadership to be in place. The work of effective PLCs is discussed in more detail in chapter two.

Implementation of professional learning communities begins with a framework that outlines the process. However, the ultimate goal of the process is to create culture change within academic institutions. Implementing the professional learning communities process proves complex, yet research highlights an important conclusion: effective leadership involvement stands critical to the success of education improvement initiatives. While many studies have explored the skills and competencies needed by instructional leaders, few have focused on how leaders adapt to champion the institutional change that is often required when implementing professional learning communities.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. Given that the literature suggests that instructional leaders are often formally unprepared for this role
(Sarason, 1996; Fullan, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006), understanding how they navigate the landscape of change is essential.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the proposed study. The questions are designed to gain an understanding of the instructional leaders’ perceptions of their experience and personal changes in implementing professional learning communities within the schools they serve. Each question helps to direct subsequent steps in the research methodology and bring focus to the research problem, significance, and findings:

- *How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing professional learning communities within their schools?*

- *How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing professional learning communities necessitated?*

**Research Approach**

The purpose of this qualitative study lies in understanding how instructional leaders’ perceptions about leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. Specifically, the study explores how instructional leaders’ perceptions about themselves as leaders changed as a result of this experience. The investigation utilized a case study approach to gather data.

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined a case study as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes” (p. 96-97). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) confirmed the appropriateness of using the case study
method when clear boundaries exist. Aligned with this finding, this case study is bounded by time and location; the improvement initiative under investigation commenced in August 2017 and concluded in May 2020, with 10 specific schools participating. In addition, Yin (2014) asserted that researchers should employ case studies when they “want to understand a real-world case” (p. 16). The real-world case of this study consists of the group of instructional leaders who implemented professional learning communities.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described one of the advantages of case study research as the ability to study current cases so information is not lost over time. The participants of the research include the current instructional leaders of schools selected for Cohort One of the Arkansas Professional Learning Communities project, as these leaders fully completed the project in June 2020. These leaders are representative of 10 schools in Arkansas. This cohort began in 2017. The study provides a description of the experiences of these Cohort One leaders and an examination of their perceived changes as instructional leaders as a result of participation in the project. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews with instructional leaders, and collects, analyzes, and interprets surveys and documents that the instructional leaders used, in order to enable deeper understanding of the instructional leaders’ perceived personal changes as a result of implementing the process.

**Researcher Perspectives**

In the first 22 years of my professional career I worked in a K-12 public school in several capacities, serving as a classroom teacher, counselor, and district administrator of curriculum and instruction. As a district administrator, I led the district-wide implementation of the Professional Learning Communities process. I also worked at the Arkansas Department of Education for three years. As the Professional Learning Communities project began during my employment, one of
my job responsibilities included coordinating the project implementation. Notably, the ADE currently serves as the umbrella organization for its various auspices, including the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, which oversees the Professional Learning Communities project.

Currently, I work for Solution Tree, a publishing company that promotes the endeavors of its authors, including those involved in Professional Learning Communities. My vocational experience brings a depth of understanding and practical experience to the study. As others could view this understanding as a liability, I am committed to the practice of *epoche*—a Greek word meaning “to refrain from judgment (p. 27)”. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the epoche process as rooted in phenomenological research but now commonly used by all qualitative researchers to examine their biases and assumptions.

**Researcher Assumptions**

Based on my experience and background, I bring assumptions and biases to the study at hand. Importantly, Yin (2014) cautioned researchers to maintain awareness of their biases and remain open to evidence that might not support their preconceived judgments or mindsets. My assumptions regarding this phenomenon include the following:

- Professional learning communities, when implemented over time, increase student achievement,
- Implementation improves the culture and morale of a school,
- Implementation increases leadership capacity, and
- Implementation transforms the instructional leader’s practices and beliefs.
In light of these assumptions, I remained open to evidence that contradicts, adds dimension, or takes a different path than my preconceived biases may presume, and maintain validity of findings.

Rationale and Significance

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. This study adds to the knowledge-base of changes required of instructional leaders in order for them to lead a school improvement initiative. The crux of this study fills the gap in literature by going beyond the theoretical concepts of instructional leadership as well as the specific practices grounded in research for leading change. Additionally, this study has the potential to influence policy for statewide and local decision makers including the legislature, state board of education and the Department of Education as well as local school boards. Further, It has the potential to influence practice by instructional leaders when implementing a school improvement initiative. Finally, it has the potential to influence future research regarding implementation of school improvement initiatives.

Definition of Terminology

The following concepts used in the study warrant inclusion in a concise glossary to heighten clarity:

- Action research: involves an investigation utilizing best practice strategies and approaches in the classroom, collecting data on the results, and comparing current and past results to determine if the new intervention improved student learning; a commitment to action research implies a dedication to eliminating less effective
instructional practices in favor of more proven ones, rather than just hanging onto approaches most familiar and comfortable (Clay et al., 2011, p. 76).

- **Adaptive challenge**: refers to the gap between the values people stand for (that constitute thriving) and the reality they face (their current lack of capacity to realize those values in their environment), (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 303).

- **Adaptive leadership**: the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009 p. 14).

- **Collaboration**: a systematic process in which people work together interdependently to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 464).

- **Cultural change**: addresses the beliefs, values, motivations, habits, and behaviors of the people who work within the organization (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

- **First order change**: innovation that is incremental, can be implemented with existing knowledge, and operates within existing paradigms (Marzano et al., 2009 p. 105).

- **Formative assessment**: an assessment for learning used to advance rather than monitor student learning (Stiggins, 2002).

- **Guaranteed and viable curriculum**: a curriculum that gives students the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class and that can be taught in the time allotted for teaching (Marzano, 2003).

- **Professional Learning Communities**: an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve; professional learning communities operate
under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (Dufour et al., 2016, p. 9-10).

- **Response to intervention**: “The additional time and support needed to learn at high levels. Response to intervention’s underlying premise is that schools should not delay providing help for struggling students until they fall far enough behind to qualify for special education, but instead should provide timely, targeted, systematic interventions to all students who demonstrate the need” (Buffum et al., 2012, p. xiii).

- **Second order change**: innovation perceived as a break from the past, as requiring new knowledge and skills and as inconsistent with existing paradigms (Marzano et al., 2009, p. 105).

- **Team**: a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 471).

- **Technical change**: the manipulation of policies, structures, and practices in an organization (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

**Summary**

Planning and implementing a school improvement effort entails a commitment to a complex endeavor involving a myriad of leaders in education who drive change. When professional learning communities meet in a collaborative effort, research shows the instructional leaders involved are utilizing an effective means to improve learning outcomes within their schools. Furthermore, research highlights an important conclusion: effective leadership involvement stands critical to the success of education improvement initiatives. Yet questions still remain concerning the instructional leader’s experiences and perceptions in regard to leading PLCs. The problem lies in instructional leaders implementing the Professional Learning
Communities project to address students’ persistent low levels of achievement, yet little is known about the adaptations instructional leaders should make to become more effective change leaders. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the study explores how instructional leaders’ perceptions about themselves as leaders changed as a result of this experience. Launched in 2017 and now in its third year of implementation, the ADE Professional Learning Communities project, specifically Cohort One which has fully completed the project, provides an effective case study for the focus of this qualitative study. The case study approach provides a means to gather data on the perceptions of change held by the instructional leaders in the project. Additional research findings such as this study can add to the knowledge-base of changes required of instructional leaders in order to lead a school improvement initiative.

In Chapter 2, a review of the scholarly research regarding the role and perceptions of instructional leaders in transforming academic outcomes pinpoints applicable findings. In comparing and contrasting appropriate research, the review helps to answer the study’s research questions; offer researchers’ confirmation or dissent concerning key assertions; and informs change leaders in academia concerning the benefits and drawbacks of professional learning communities. The focus of this study fills a literature gap by going beyond the theoretical concepts and specific practices of instructional leadership for leading change, an outcome that holds potential to influence policy, practice, and future research regarding school improvement initiatives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed after implementing a school improvement initiative. Based on the research problem and subsequent purpose of this study, this literature review helps to enhance understanding of existing research, the findings, arguments and contentions, relevant to school improvement initiatives in education. The problem lies in instructional leaders implementing the Professional Learning Communities project to address students’ persistent low levels of achievement, yet little is known about the adaptations instructional leaders should make to become more effective change leaders. The conceptual framework for the study is based in the model of adaptive leadership.

Instructional leadership comprises an important component for the implementation of strategies toward school improvement. While much literature exists on the instructional leader’s role in leading initiatives to improve student achievement, limited research exists that underscores the ways leaders must change themselves and their schools when implementing new strategies. This literature review adds to the knowledge-base of changes required of instructional leaders in order for them to effectively lead a school improvement initiative as well as inform future research and practice.

The databases used in the literature review included EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The search terms included the following: organizational change, adaptive change, cultural change, education reform, instructional leadership, and professional learning communities. While an abundance of literature exists regarding professional learning communities as well as adaptive leadership, a search for studies returned less than five results when conducting a Boolean search of professional learning communities and adaptive
leadership. Furthermore, these results were not focused on the principal or instructional leader of the school. The Boolean search for educational change and adaptive leadership returned more results, but again, none focused on the principal as the adaptive leader. These results show a gap in the knowledge base related to applying adaptive leadership in professional learning communities specifically and in education reform in general.

Student achievement remains an ongoing concern in the United States. Attempts to improve student outcomes have focused on technical or first order change, specifically the manipulation of an organization’s policies, structures, and practices (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). Leithwood (1992) cited changes such as altering a master schedule and implementing a new dress code as examples of first order change. Other examples include increasing the requirements for those entering the teaching force or enhancing graduation requirements. Instructional leaders have implemented these technical changes incrementally with existing knowledge, operating within the existing paradigm that the purpose of schools lies in the quality and strategies of teaching rather than whether students are learning (Marzano et al., 2009).

In contrast, second order change occurs when innovation includes three characteristics: it breaks from past approaches, requires new knowledge and skills, and is inconsistent with existing paradigms (Marzano et al, 2009 p. 105). Leithwood (1992) described second order change as modifications fundamentally altering the system. The Professional Learning Communities framework demonstrates second order change. Schools that function as a high-performing professional learning community (PLC) view the primary function of schools as ensuring high levels of learning for all students (Dufour et al., 2016, p. 11). While effective teaching is critically important, change leaders view the teaching component as a means to ensure optimum learning, rather than as an end in itself.
This qualitative case study is guided by the following research questions:

- *How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing professional learning communities within their schools?*
- *How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing professional learning communities necessitated?*

With these research goals in mind, this chapter reviews the literature regarding school improvement initiatives in education.

Studies reveal that school reform initiatives have met with low success, largely due to poor instructional leadership. As this study seeks to understand the perceptions of instructional leaders involved in personal and professional change resulting from the implementation of the PLC process, gaining an understanding of the key topics surfacing in the study proves important. The first section discusses findings and contentions related to the conceptual framework of Professional Learning Communities the change initiative that the instructional leaders in the study implemented. The second section briefly examines the topic of instructional leaders and outlines the role of instructional leaders in a change initiative. The third section, focused on adaptive change, explores the theoretical framework and investigates the link between this concept’s importance and the successful implementation of improvement initiatives.

**Professional Learning Communities Framework**

As educators use the term *professional learning communities* (PLCs) so frequently, the meaning has become diluted. Many think of PLCs as a meeting of teachers, when in reality teacher collaboration comprises only one component of the process (DuFour et al., 2008). Many school leaders may say their *professional learning community team* meets every Tuesday, a view solely focused on schedule changes (a technical or first order change) to allow common time for
meetings during the school day. Yet, as research indicates, a PLC requires innovation perceived as a break from the past, necessitates new knowledge and skills, remains inconsistent with existing paradigms (second order change), and begins with changing the culture:

When a culture has truly shifted, a faculty recognizes that they *are* a PLC; they do not *do* PLCs. They subject every practice, program, policy and procedure to ongoing review and constant evaluation according to very different assumptions than those that guided the school in the past (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 21).

As DuFour et al. (2016) attested, when a school faculty is immersed in the PLC culture, a shift in mindset occurs that extends beyond existing assumptions concerning collaborative review and evaluation.

Supplementing this view of DuFour et al. (2016), available literature includes more than one definition of a professional learning community. Learning Forward (2020; formerly the National Staff Development Council) defines a PLC as “professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students and occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment”. The Glossary of Education Reform (2014) defines a PLC as “a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students”. Louis et al. (1996) defined a PLC as “a movement toward five elements of practice: shared values, a focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue (p. 760)”. Lastly, Hord (2009) defined PLCs as “the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seeking and sharing learning, and then acting on their learning (p. 6)”. The goal of their actions, Hord continued, is “to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students’ benefit (p. 6)”; thus, this arrangement may also be termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. The word *professional* refers to the professionals in the school who are engaged in continuous learning.
All definitions thus cited include similar language and support the premise that a PLC exists to ensure high levels of learning for all students through the educators’ ongoing collaborative learning. This study utilizes the definition of the Professional Learning Communities process as DuFour et al. (2016) put forth: professional learning communities entail an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. In other words, PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is based in continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.

Hord’s review of PLCs (1997) cited three purposes for her investigation: (a) to define and describe what the literature calls a professional learning community; (b) to describe what happens when a school staff studies, works, plans, and takes action collectively for the purpose of increased learning for students; and (c) to reveal what is known about how to create such communities of professionals in schools. Hord found successful PLCs contain the following:

- **Community membership**—all teachers participate,
- **Leadership**—the school leadership must remain supportive,
- **Time for learning**—leaders must make time available for the teams to meet,
- **Space for learning**—teams need a designated location to meet,
- **Data use and support**—the teams should be capable of using data effectively, and
- **Distributed leadership**—the principal of the school must allow for teacher leadership.

In a later article, Hord (2009) defined PLCs as the teachers and administrators in a school continuously seeking and sharing learning, then acting on their learning. Hord asserted the goal lies in enhancing the professionals’ effectiveness for the students’ benefit. Ultimately, the word
in the term refers to the professionals in the school and the continuous learning of those professionals.

In a similar mindset, the research of Stoll et al. (2006) highlighted five key characteristics of PLCs as the following:

- Shared values and vision,
- Collective responsibility,
- Reflective professional inquiry,
- Collaboration, and
- Promotion of both group and individual learning.

A review of literature supports the Professional Learning Communities framework as described in the following section. DuFour (2004) described three big ideas associated with PLCs, while other researchers such as Marzano (2003), Stiggins (2002), Buffum et al. (2018), and Senge et al. (1994) presented findings to augment the discussion.

**First Big Idea: Ensuring All Students Learn**

In 2004, DuFour described three big ideas or significant supportive concepts surrounding the paradigms of professional learning communities. The first big idea entails instructional leaders ensuring all students learn. Schools operating with this belief “are dedicated to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students actually acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of each unit, course, and grade level” (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 11). The schools operating in this manner ensure learning by asking four critical questions:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they haven’t learned it?
4. How will we respond when they have learned it?

The first question, “What do we want students to learn?” perhaps represents the most important and difficult point for school leadership to address. “The PLC process is predicated on a deep understanding on the part of all educators of what all students must know and be able to do as a result of every unit of instruction,” (DuFour et al. 2016, p. 113). According to Marzano (2003), this knowledge proves necessary for schools to create a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Ensuring a guaranteed and viable curriculum “(1) gives students access to the same essential learning outcomes regardless of who is teaching the class and (2) can be taught in the time allotted” (Marzano, 2003, p. 24).

Once school leadership has determined the guaranteed and viable curriculum articulating what they want students to learn, they must answer the second question, “How will we know when they have learned it?” In this stage, staff must implement a process for creating and administering formative assessments. As defined earlier, a formative assessment consists of an assessment for learning used to advance rather than monitor student learning (Stiggins, 2002). Formative assessments provide frequent evidence and are intended to enhance learning. A simple example of a formative assessment involves instructors checking for student understanding during the lesson through asking for written or verbal feedback, administering a quiz, or students completing a brief group or individual assignment (Stiggins, 2002).

The last two questions asking, “How will we respond?” when students have and haven’t learned it” drive the response to student learning; to answer the questions effectively and advance learning at high levels, a school must maintain a system that addresses student needs for additional time and support (DuFour et al., 2016). Buffum et al. (2012) confirmed this contention, explaining the underlying premise of this system, called Response to Intervention.
(RTI), is based in the belief that schools should not delay providing help for struggling students, not waiting until they fall far enough behind to qualify for special education. Instead, schools should provide timely, targeted, systematic interventions to all students who demonstrate the need (p. xiii).

RTI should focus not only on struggling students but on achieving ones as well, Buffum et al. (2018) asserted. A school must also have a systematic plan to respond when students already know the material. These students need opportunities to continue learning rather than simply waiting until the other students are ready to move on. Buffum et al. (2018) referred to these opportunities as *extensions* and defined an extension as stretching students beyond essential grade-level curriculum or levels of proficiency.

**Second Big Idea: Culture of Collaboration**

The second big idea DuFour et al. (2016) postulated entails a culture of collaboration. DuFour et al. (2016) defined collaboration as “a systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results” (p. 464). Collaboration allows teachers to develop the systematic process necessary for answering the four critical questions. Teachers working in collaboration become members of a team, defined as a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal, for which members are held mutually accountable (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 471). Teacher teams work in a continuous cycle of inquiry that allows them to analyze and develop practices intended to improve classroom instruction, which in turn holds potential to increase student learning.
**Third Big Idea: Focus on Results**

The third big idea, a focus on results, requires teacher collaborative teams to judge their effectiveness by outcomes—student learning as opposed to intentions. “Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark, not purposeful improvement,” (DuFour et al. 2018, p. 17). Senge et al. (1994) concluded, “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44). PLCs operate in a continual process that includes the gathering of student learning evidence; development and implementation of strategies to respond to learning; analysis of the changes’ impact; and evaluation of the changes’ effectiveness before starting the process again. Collaborative teams remain in a constant cycle of learning in order to improve student learning outcomes.

**Instructional Leadership**

Using the term *instructional leader* when referring to the school principal became prominent in the 1980s during the Effective Schools movement. It fell out of prominence in the 1990s when *transformational leadership* gained prominence when referring to school leaders, an approach characterized by dynamic leaders creating a moral imperative to close the achievement gap (DuFour et al., 2008). Transformational leadership failed to last beyond the early 2000s as a focus on accountability increased and researchers found the approach simply too broad to provide the specificity needed to produce outcomes of increased student achievement (DuFour et al., 2008). This focus on accountability resulted in bringing back the term *instructional leader* to describe the school principal’s role (Fullan, 2014; Hallinger, 2012).
The Instructional Leadership Framework

Hallinger and Murphy (1986) conceptualized the most widely accepted framework for instructional leadership. This framework began as a two-dimensional model consisting of eight leadership functions and six leadership processes yet has evolved over time to include three conceptualized dimensions, each necessary for the instructional leadership role. First, defining the school’s mission involves working with the staff to develop and communicate clear, measurable goals for student academic achievement. Next, managing the instructional program requires the principal’s involvement in the practices of teaching and learning. Finally, creating a positive school climate involves developing a culture of continuous improvement for both teachers and students (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Hallinger, 2012).

![Diagram of the Instructional Leadership Framework]

**Figure 1**

*Hallinger and Murphy’s Framework for Instructional Leadership*

*Note.* This figure shows three dimensions of instructional leadership further detailed into ten primary functions (Hallinger, 2012), each supporting the school’s mission, instructional program, or positive school climate.
Supplementing and corroborating the work of Hallinger and Murphy, Robinson (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 relevant research studies, each examining the impact of educational leadership on student learning; she identified five leadership practices that can make a significant positive difference in academic outcomes. The practices she cited include the following:

- Establishing goals and expectations,
- Resourcing strategically,
- Ensuring quality teaching,
- Leading teacher learning and development, and
- Ensuring an orderly and safe environment.

Further, Robinson (2011) identified two key factors associated with the five practices: first, *leading teacher learning and development* makes the greatest impact on student learning; second, the school principal impacting student learning the most was the one participating as a learner with the teachers. This finding as Robinson identified further cements the contention that the instructional leaders’ ongoing, job-embedded learning holds potential for making the greatest impact on student academic outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016).

**Instructional Leaders: Implementing Change Initiatives**

The assertion that instructional leaders provide the key to implementing change initiatives is backed by research findings. As Fullan (2002) asserted, “Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement” (p. 16). Historically, the educational community has considered high standards and compliance as the norm for instructional leaders; past voices have contended that if everyone just *followed the rules*, change initiatives would occur and prove sustainable.
Yet, while compliance and rules comprise one necessary component, principals must more importantly champion cultural change, Fullan (2002).

Fullan (2002) stressed the characteristics of five components of change leadership that principals working to enact cultural change exhibit. *First*, principals backing cultural change embrace a moral purpose guiding them in several ways: when seeking to close achievement gaps, improve education for all students, and remain laser focused on student learning. *Second*, principals must possess a clear understanding of the change process. Fullan argued that keys to understanding change include innovating selectively rather than trying to innovate more than any other leaders; appreciating the implementation dip; understanding and redefining resistance; and finally, *reculturing*. Arguing that reculturing comprises the most important component in understanding change, Fullan asserted, “Reculturing is the name of the game. Much change is structural and superficial. Transforming culture—changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it—leads to deep lasting change” (pp. 17-18).

Building on the characteristics of the first two components, Fullan (2002) continued with the next three. *Third*, he contended, cultural change principals develop relationships with all in the organization, especially those with differing views. He argued that relationships create the right climate for the change process to thrive. *Fourth*, Fullan cited knowledge and creation sharing as key, arguing that instructional leaders must share information through a social process, making relationships and professional learning communities essential. In this view, the principal remains the lead learner who demonstrates lifelong learning through sharing, encouraging action research, and implementing inquiry groups among staff. According to Fullan, the *fifth* component is the process of creating coherence. Change leaders must prove capable of developing coherence by maintaining a clear focus on student learning.
More recently, Fullan (2014) expanded on the principal’s role as change agent and discussed the connection of passion to leadership skills. Passion alone—a fervent conviction for the moral imperative that all students learn at high levels—is not enough, Fullan contended. Principals also need skills they continually refine in order to lead schools through the change process. Fullan argued that passion without skill proves ineffective and can lead to both burnout and failure when implementing change.

Adding another dimension to this argument, Muhammad and Cruz (2019) claimed that leading change entails a delicate balance between an authoritative and even demanding approach versus one providing autonomy. Further, the researchers countered a common misconception that asserts leaders are born and not made. Muhammad and Cruz argued that leading change does not require an innate, dynamic personality and charisma; instead, they asserted, anyone can learn the skills necessary to lead change. The authors concluded that instructional leaders can effectively lead change when they possess four essential skills. First, leaders must effectively communicate the rationale—the why of the work. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) argued that people will resist change when they do not clearly understand its vision and rationale. Second, leaders must effectively establish trust—the who of the work. Muhammad and Cruz argued that people not only need facts and evidence to embrace change but must feel a personal connection to the leader as well as believe the leader has a connection to the purpose. Third, leaders must effectively build capacity—the how of the work. Muhammad and Cruz claimed that people will more likely take a risk if they have been trained and professionally prepared for the change. Fourth, leaders must get results—the do of the work. The researchers contended that this fourth skill cannot exist alone; leaders must possess all four to effectively lead change. Their argument supports the
concept that instructional leaders need to focus not only on the structural components of change but also on changes linked to cultural (or adaptive) components.

**Conceptual Framework—Adaptive Leadership**

The conceptual framework that guides this study is adaptive leadership, the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009 p. 14). Adaptive leaders realize change proves complex and that their responsibility lies in facilitating change in a way that compels the organization to thrive. “The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems” (p. 19). While technical problems exhibit clear solutions based on current knowledge and administrators leading in a vacuum, adaptive challenges in contrast prove more complex, requiring new thinking and knowledge as leaders work with stakeholders to reach resolution. Leading through an adaptive challenge requires a change in people’s beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Sometimes the type of change a leader faces seems clear-cut, whether technical or adaptive. However, many times the change encompasses both technical and adaptive aspects (Heifetz et al., 2009).

**The Nature of Adaptive Leadership**

The adaptive leadership process involves an iterative progression, with three key activities occurring repeatedly and building upon each other in succession. Heifetz et al. (2009) noted these three activities as, first, leaders observing events and patterns around them; second, interpreting what they observe, including formulating multiple hypotheses about what is transpiring; and third, designing interventions based on the observations and interpretations (p. 32). Observation is critical as the subjective activity; the observer sees different scenarios based on their past experiences.
Heifetz et al. (2009) confirmed that the goal lies in adaptive leaders making their observations as objective as possible and suggested leaders remove themselves from the middle of the action to collect as much data as possible. Once the leader has collected the data from observation, the next step addresses interpreting the collected data. Interpretations occur quickly and subconsciously during observation as the mind seeks to find meaning and discover one right answer. The goal for the adaptive leader rests in the ability to view their observation from multiple perspectives. The third activity, designing interventions, must be based on conclusions drawn from observation and interpretation. When designing interventions, leaders should note several considerations. First, the intervention must remain relevant and fit in context with the purpose. Second, the leader must consider available resources, and third, must consider whether authority is at hand to implement the intervention. Finally, leaders must consider whether they possess the skillset to implement the intervention. Heifetz et al. (2009) claimed that effective leaders not only work within their current skillset but also work to enhance their skillset.

Further, Heifetz et al. (2009) asserted, “Adaptive leadership is about skill plus will” (p. 37). *Skill* requires the leader to learn new information or competencies while *will* requires courage and heart. The leader is extending heart and courage to understand and make connection to the people he or she is trying to lead. The researchers stated, "You are trying to move people who have not been convinced by logic and facts. They prefer the status quo to the risks of doing things differently. They are stuck in their hearts and stomachs, not in their heads” (p. 38).

With the perspective that education leaders often interchange the terms *adaptive* and *cultural* when describing change modalities, Muhammad (2018) described the two types of organizational change in schools as *technical* and *cultural*. Muhammad wrote, “Technical changes are changes to the tools or mechanisms professionals use to do their jobs effectively” (p.
These include changes that emerge as the most visible, such as changing the number of periods or classes in a day, the number of courses required for graduation, the types of courses required, or how many minutes are allowed for recess. Technical changes seem popular and frequently implemented. They provide tangible evidence of the leader taking a step to enact change. Yet, tangible evidence alone does not impact the practices and beliefs of the educators working in the system, which only maintains the status quo.

Countering the view that technical changes can ultimately produce the changes sought in academic outcomes, Fullan (2007) promulgated the following:

Most strategies for reform focus on structures, formal requirements, and events-based activities . . . . They do not struggle directly with the existing cultures within which new values and practices may be required . . . . Restructuring (which can be done by fiat) occurs time and time again whereas reculturing (how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits) is what is needed (p. 25)

Adding to the discussion, according to Muhammad and Cruz (2019), “Cultural change refers to addressing the beliefs, values, motivations, habits, and behaviors of the people who work within the organization” (p. 4). Without addressing the culture, the change initiative will not become the norm in the organization. Kotter (1996) “Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed” (p. 14).

The Challenges of Adaptive Leadership

One of many responsibilities of instructional leaders includes implementing improvement initiatives. Nelson and Squires (2017) explained their claim that change leaders continually remain under pressure to improve student achievement and are many times encouraged to make changes for the sake of appearing responsive to stakeholder demands. The researchers asserted the following:
The environment within which educational leaders operate is dynamic and continues to change in response to external pressures and societal changes. This environment manifests itself in an ever-increasing demand from stakeholders for improved performance in the operations of educational institutions (p. 111).

This argument of Nelson and Squires builds on the statements of Heifetz and Linsky (2004), who shared their findings that leading change initiatives in education proves demanding and deals with topics typically difficult for leaders and community members to acknowledge and discuss. Wagner et al. (2006) concluded that the leaders themselves must become different by examining their personal beliefs and assumptions in order to meet the challenge of leading school change. Additionally, Heifetz and Laurie (2011) argued, “Solutions to adaptive problems in schools are not found in the leaders but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions” (p. 58).

Wagner et al. (2006) acknowledged the change required of leaders and took the discussion a step further, asserting the leaders do not know how to lead through adaptive challenges. They argued, “Adaptive challenges in schools do not come with a manual and there is no checklist to ensure success. If leaders knew how to lead through an adaptive challenge, they would already be doing so” (p. 195). Further, Wagner et al. suggested five stances a leader needs to consider when leading a change initiative.

The mindset behind the first stance, to Embrace the Fuller Picture, acknowledges that school reform remains complex, requiring a deep understanding of both the change initiative itself as well as the changes required of teachers and other school leadership. The second stance, titled Set an Example, is based on the argument that school leaders must remain vulnerable with what they do not know, coupled with a willingness to serve as a learning leader. Further, their learning must intersect with a goal in such a way that any steps short of achieving the goal will
compromise the success of the initiative. The third stance, to Encourage Others to Take Up Their Own Personal Learning at Work, means that leaders changing themselves does not equate to successful change. Instructional leaders must ensure their colleagues have identified and defined a personal learning goal directly related to where the person needs to improve, and then ensure the person has connected to the challenge of improving teaching and learning. The fourth stance, to Welcome Contradictions, challenges leaders to create an environment that clearly conveys the message that contradictions to change not only prove inevitable but are welcomed and provide new learning opportunities. The fifth and final stance, to Create Organizations That Increase Personal Capacities, is based on the reassertion of the leader’s need to grow and change when leading adaptive challenges; this stance further reaffirms the ultimate objective—increasing student achievement, which can only occur when the instructional leaders grow and learn themselves.

Substantiating these five stances for change leaders as Wagner et al. advanced, Fullan affirmed that changing behavior remains the primary focus in adaptive and cultural change. Fullan (2007) asserted, “All successful change processes have a bias for actions … behaviors and emotions change before beliefs—we need to act in a new way before we get insight and feelings related to new beliefs” (p. 41). Other views in literature enhance this contention, with none found to dispute that the adaptive leadership process “is uncomfortable, as it challenges our most deeply held beliefs and suggests that deeply held values are losing relevance, bringing to the surface legitimate but competing perspectives or commitments” (Australian Public Service Commission, 2011, p. 14).
Summary

The preceding literature review provides a strong rationale for the importance of examining the implementation of professional learning communities and the changes instructional leaders have faced as a result of the implementation process. The review first provided background to the literature cited, allowing the problem and purpose of the study, along with the research questions, to inform the review’s progression. Available literature addressed and supported the use and advancement of the Professional Learning Communities framework, first offering contrasting definitions of PLCs at large, providing key traits of successful PLCs, and then examining three big ideas research findings have proffered. The review then explored instructional leadership and the capacities and requirements of change leaders to effect transformative change in academic outcomes. The merits and challenges of an adaptive leadership framework were then examined in-depth, looking at five imperative stances as Wagner et al. (2006) promulgated.

With the completion of this literature review, the stage is set for an exploration of the study’s methodology. A statement of the research questions sets the vision for the study, with an intent to inform the study’s findings. A clear presentation of the study’s research design and rationale, the researcher’s role, and research procedures follows, laying the groundwork for the research application. The next chapter also covers the study’s data analysis, information about reliability and validity, and a thorough dive into ethical procedures, including safeguards implemented to prevent negative consequences, with expectations for the study’s findings to bridge a literature gap and potentially influence policy, practice, and future research regarding school improvement initiatives.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed after implementing a school improvement initiative. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?
- How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?

The chapter describes the research methodology, including the following discussion areas: the rationale for the research approach and the research sample; an overview of information needed, details of the research design, data collection methods and tools, and data analysis and synthesis; ethical considerations including issues of trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations; and a concluding summary that includes a brief chapter synopsis as well as an overview of the next chapter’s purpose to achieve research findings and data analysis results.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

The qualitative research approach is used when collecting text-based data and attempting to answer the five key questions—who, what, when, where, why, and how—with the overall purpose of developing an understanding of how people make sense of their lives (Terrell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdale 2016). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) not only described the overall purposes of qualitative research as the aim to achieve an understanding of how people view, discern, and come to terms with their life experiences, but also delineated the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making as well as described how people interpret what they experience. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined qualitative research as the following:
Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (p.8)

Drawing on this definition as the researchers described, this study seeks to augment the understanding of the experiences of instructional leaders as they implemented a school improvement initiative and how they were changed through the implementation process. The key features of the qualitative approach fit well with this study in the following ways: the qualitative approach (a) is best used to describe how people interpret what they experience, (b) includes the collection of data in a natural setting, and (c) delineates the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making.

Rationale for Case Study Methodology

The hub of this investigation comprises a case study bounded by place and time; the study centers on instructional leaders participating in the Arkansas Professional Learning Communities project cohort one, which began in August, 2017 and focuses on the experiences of those instructional leaders through May, 2020. When considering research validating the use of the case study method, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described an advantage of case study research as the ability to study current cases so information is preserved, not lost over time. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined a case study as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information
and reports a case description and case themes” (p. 96-97). Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined a case study as the following:

A qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case is bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (p. 247)

In this definition, Creswell and Creswell (2018) confirmed the appropriateness of using the case study method when clear boundaries exist. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) corroborated this assertion as well. Yin (2014) supplemented these parameters, stating case studies should be used when “you want to understand a real-world case” (p. 16). This study fits well with case study design because it seeks to understand a real-world case and is bounded by place and time, studying instructional leaders who participated in the Arkansas Professional Learning Communities project from August, 2017 through May, 2020 and implemented this school improvement initiative in their school.

Research Sample

A purposeful sampling procedure was used in the study. Purposeful sampling is appropriate when the researcher seeks to intentionally select from a population based on defined criteria (Terrell 2016). Creswell and Poth (2018) defined purposeful sampling as intentionally selecting individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceived their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. The specific purposeful sampling strategy consisted of criterion sampling, selecting participants because they met a certain set of criteria as the researcher predetermines (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019).
The criterion for the participants in the study are the current instructional leaders of schools selected for Cohort One of the Arkansas Professional Learning Communities Project. These leaders are representative of 10 schools in Arkansas, as shown in Table One. With the first cohort launched in 10 schools in 2017, participation in the project required a three-year commitment and the instructional leaders concluded their project participation in May 2020. The study provides a description of these leaders’ experiences as well as examine their perceived changes as instructional leaders as a result of participation in the project.

### Table 1

**Number of Instructional Leaders and The Types of Schools in Cohort One**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Leaders</th>
<th>Elementary School</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. This table shows the number of total instructional leaders participating in the study, followed by the number of leaders from each school type.*

### Overview of Information Needed

This case study focused on instructional leaders who implemented professional learning communities in their school as an improvement initiative. In seeking to understand how these leaders implemented the process and how they changed as a result of the process, two research questions were explored to gather the information needed:

- *How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?*

- *How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?*

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) cite types of information needed for case study research. The first type is contextual information that describes the culture and environment which may influence behavior. The second type is demographic which helps explain who the participants are
as well as help explain participants’ perceptions along with the similarities and differences of participants’ perceptions. The third type of information is perceptual. This information “uncovers participants’ descriptions of their experiences related to such things as how experiences influenced the decisions they made, whether they had a change of mind or a shift in attitude. Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019, p. 189).

The information for this study includes the following:

- Contextual information pertaining to the schools, which includes geographic and demographic information.
- Demographic information pertaining to participants, which includes number of years in education, number of years as an instructional leader, and highest level of education.
- Instructional leaders’ perceptions regarding how they changed during the implementation process.
- Instructional leaders’ perceptions regarding the experience of implementing professional learning communities within their school.

**Research Design and Data Collection**

The participants, the instructional leaders of Cohort One, were sent an email letter including an informed consent describing the purpose of the study as well as inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix A and B). The researcher found the email addresses of each participant on their school webpages. The instructional leaders who agreed to participate were sent a list of questions by Google forms (see Appendix C), which collected the responses. Because it is reasonable to assume differences in implementation, outcomes, and perceptions of the participants, the questionnaire collected geographic and demographic data about the school
as well as information about the principal and his or her perceptions of change in the school and within him or herself. These data were used to select a stratified sample of participants to interview. The questions seeking to understand the principals’ perception of change were open-ended and explored the level of adaptive leadership displayed during implementation. The letter also asked the participants to return their responses by a specific date. As noted, the introductory email with attached informed consent to participants as well as the follow-up interview questions are included in the Appendices.

After returning the responses to the emailed questions, selected participants engaged in the interview process (see Appendix D). The researcher conducted the interviews as a follow-up to the open-ended questions in an effort to clarify answers and seek additional information. Interviews are selected as a means of data collection because they can potentially provide rich, robust descriptions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described interviews as useful when researchers cannot directly observe participants in other ways and when the retrieval of historical information will enhance the study. Additionally, interviews allow the researcher to control the line of questioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) asserted that field tests asking for feedback from peers or colleagues significantly improve the study. Because of this, a group of principals implementing the same Professional Learning Communities initiative but not included in the study provided field testing of a draft version of the questionnaire and follow-up interview questions. Their feedback did not lead the researcher to make any modifications to the original questions.

After analyzing and coding the results of the emailed questionnaire, the researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, via zoom with the instructional leaders; the interview protocol is adapted from the protocol that Creswell and Poth (2018) developed. The
interviews were recorded as well as documented through field notes taken to capture the participants’ tone and body language, which the interview transcript did not make evident. The interviews focused on gaining insight into the leadership practices utilized and on gaining a deep understanding of the instructional leaders’ perceptions of change within themselves during the implementation process of the Arkansas Professional Learning Communities school improvement initiative. All participants were asked the same questions with an opportunity to elaborate as needed.

Initially, the researcher intended to collect, analyze, and code documents that the instructional leaders utilized during the implementation process of the Professional Learning Communities initiative. The purpose of this document examination was to gain insight and awareness of the change that occurred in the leaders and the schools they led during the implementation process that the interview process will not otherwise capture. The researcher found that in seeking to answer perceptions of change, the documents did not prove to be useful.

**Figure 2**
*Research Design Steps*

*Note.* Figure 2 depicts the six steps of research design, summarizing the protocol of the study as Creswell and Poth (2018) delineated.
The process required obtaining informed consent through the emailed questionnaire and gathering initial data through questionnaire responses, supplementing and enhancing the data through follow-up interviews, interview transcription that adds validity, subsequent analysis and coding that informs the findings, and initially intended to conduct an additional document analysis to augment the findings and recommendations.

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The interpretation of the data collected from emailed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, was examined with the emerging themes and interpretations related to the entire case presented using a holistic analysis approach Bloomberg and Volpe (2019). The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. Additionally, the study explored their perceptions about what prepared them for the change initiative. Other details of data analysis include a code assigned to each principal to protect anonymity and the recording of all interviews with a verbatim transcription. To verify the transcriptions, the researcher read through the transcripts while listening to the interview recordings. Once transcribed, the data was analyzed with a focus on emerging themes. The researcher also analyzed and categorized the questionnaires searching for emerging themes. The purpose of the analysis was seeking to understand the mindsets of instructional leaders before and after implementation in order to garner a depth of understanding of how the instructional leaders changed as a result of the process.

**Ethical Considerations**

An IRB approval as developed, presented, and approved included background/context, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, and the proposed methodological
approach. Informed consent was acquired from each of the participants, and the participants’ privacy was protected at all times. The methodology ensures the data remains untraceable to individuals or schools.

Credibility is established when the study emerges as believable from the participant’s perspective (Terrell, 2016). Triangulation of the data analyzed, member checking, and peer debriefing establishes the study’s credibility. Triangulation occurred through a search for common themes in the questionnaires and the interviews. Member checking was accomplished by the participants reviews of a summary of interpretations and conclusions of their interview to determine the extent the data represents their perceptions or experiences. In order to strengthen the accuracy of the findings Creswell and Poth (2018), peer debriefing occurred throughout the process through discussions with the dissertation chair regarding process, congruency of findings, and tentative interpretations about the study.

Confirmability has been established through reflexivity and an audit trail. The audit trail provides a step-by-step account of the study and allows a retracing of the process. The Reflexivity occurred through a continual awareness of researcher actions and their impact on the study’s results (Terrell, 2016). The researcher also kept field notes of personal insights and recognized biases occurring during the interview process to inform later findings.

Transferability allows the reader to determine if the study’s findings apply to other situations, and the provision of a thick description of the results allow a level of transferability. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) described the use of “a rich, thick description” of the setting, the participants in the study, and the findings, “with adequate evidence presented in the forms of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (p. 257) as a strategy to enable transferability.
Limitations and Delimitations

This study focuses on instructional leaders participating in the Professional Learning Communities project under the auspices of the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). One of the limitations of this study includes the lack of prior research involving the ADE initiative. Professional Learning Communities focus on improving academic outcomes for Arkansas public school students, a relatively innovative statewide effort with its first implementation launched in 2017. Another limitation rests in the transferability of the study since its focus remains specific to Arkansas. However, other schools throughout the United States or other areas—that have similar initiatives planned, needed, or currently in implementation phases—could draw parallels with this study and potentially use its findings to inform efforts of instructional leaders participating in a school change process.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research methodology of the study, with the purpose of understanding how instructional leaders led change within their schools and were changed by participating in the voluntary adoption of professional learning communities. The methodology involving a qualitative case study include instructional leaders answering a questionnaire sent via email and then submitting to an open-ended, semi-structured interview process. The instructional leaders giving consent for study participation comprise a sample from Cohort One of the Professional Learning Communities project. The interviews were recorded as well as documented through field notes taken to capture the participants’ tone and body language. Chapters four and five present the results of analyzing the questionnaires, interviews, and documents as well as outline findings and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative study explored how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed after implementing a school improvement initiative. This chapter describes the findings addressing the research problem, focusing on the adaptations leaders have to make to champion institutional change and was guided by the following research questions:

*How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?*

*How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?*

The key findings were derived from an analysis of data from questionnaire and interview responses. Each of the ten principals who participated in this study led a school through Cohort One of the Arkansas Department of Education Professional Learning Communities Project. All principals responded to the questionnaire, and eight of the ten respondents were interviewed.

**Data Analysis**

Data were collected for the study via an email questionnaire and open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded, and field notes noted the participants’ tone and body language.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) state that case study research needs the following types of information: contextual, demographic, and perceptual, to explain the phenomenon under study fully. The data derived from the demographic and contextual questions were used to select a stratified sample of principals to interview. The data from the perceptual questions augmented and supported the data collected from the interviews. Table two delineates the types of questions from the questionnaire by the three types of information sought.
Table 2

*Categories of Questions on Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual Information</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Perceptual Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What grade levels are represented at your school?</td>
<td>What is your highest level of Education?</td>
<td>How are you different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many students attend your school?</td>
<td>How long have you been a principal at your current school?</td>
<td>How is your school different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many teachers work in your school?</td>
<td></td>
<td>What would you consider your greatest challenges during implementation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What percent of your students receive free or reduced lunches?</td>
<td></td>
<td>How did you resolve those challenges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What percent of your students are English learners?</td>
<td></td>
<td>What did you learn during the implementation process?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table delineates the categories of the questions on the questionnaire, followed by the questions in each category.

Before the data were analyzed, each principal was assigned a numerical code, replacing their name. These numbers were used throughout the analysis to protect the identity of each principal. The word document containing the information that connected each principal to a number was stored in a password-protected file.

The responses to participant questionnaires provided the first data set. The demographic and contextual information from these questionnaires were analyzed to determine a stratified sample of principals to interview. The demographic and contextual data can be found in Table 3 below.
Because it is reasonable to assume differences in implementation, outcomes, and perceptions of the participants, the geographic and demographic data about the school as well as information about the principal were used to select a stratified sample of participants to interview. Principal 2, Principal 6, and Principal 10 were selected for interviews because they each have different levels of education and varying levels of experience at their school. Additional differences include the size of their schools, free and reduced lunch percentage, and number of English Learners. Data saturation was evident after Principals 3, 7, 8, and 9 were interviewed. Therefore, principals 4 and 5 were not interviewed.

All data were sorted by the numerical code assigned to each principal. An Excel workbook facilitated the data organization. The organizational categories included demographic and contextual responses for each principal, responses to the perceptual questions, the responses from the questionnaire’s open-ended question, and the responses from each of the four interview questions. Appendix F is an example of how the data were organized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Years as Principal at School</th>
<th>Grade Levels in School</th>
<th>Number of Students in School</th>
<th>Number of Teachers in School</th>
<th>Percent Free/Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Percent Special Education</th>
<th>Percent English Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>PK-6</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>PK-6</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>PK-4</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>1344</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After the data were organized, coding began with an initial reading of the questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts. After the initial review, coding continued more systematically using the initial themes. Each response was color coded to clearly identify sections supporting each theme. Additionally, each theme was analyzed seeking subthemes. The process was repeated until themes naturally emerged and were identified for each question.

**Results Related to Research Questions**

Data were analyzed corresponding with each research question.

**Research Question One**

As shown in Table 4, research question one is answered by including responses from both interviews and questionnaires.

_**How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?**_

**Table 4**

*Open-Ended Questions Informing Research Question One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Open-Ended Questions</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?</td>
<td>Why did you participate in the PLC project?</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would you consider your greatest challenges during implementation? How did you resolve those challenges?</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How is your school different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities?</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you learn about school culture as a result of participation in the process?</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table illustrates the similarities of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the interview protocol to question one.

_Why did you participate in the PLC project? Prior knowledge or experience with PLCs was the primary motivator to participate in the Department of Education project._ While
participants cited previous experience as the primary reason for participation, several other motivators emerged. These included attending a conference that described PLC, prior reading and research on the topic, and previous attempts to implement the PLC process. Five out of eight principals stated they had attended a conference. Principal 3 stated,

It was a no brainer. I had spent probably two solid years here taking my staff to all the conferences that I could afford in my budget...I had managed to get all of them through the PLC at Work and Overview conference.

Five out of eight principals stated that they had tried without success to implement the process prior to applying for the project. Principal 2 stated,

We started the process, four years prior to that. And I just felt like I had done everything I could as a leader to take us to a level of implementation but I needed help getting us to a deeper level of understanding

Six out of eight principals stated that they had an interest in applying because they had learned about the process through preliminary reading and research. Principal 7 stated, “I had brought in the second edition of learning by doing and I had actually done some research myself with professional learning communities when I began my doctoral study program”.

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior Knowledge of</td>
<td>Attending a Conference</td>
<td>5/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning</td>
<td>Prior Reading/Research</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities</td>
<td>Prior attempted implementation</td>
<td>5/8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What would you consider your greatest challenges during implementation? How did you resolve those challenges?** Three themes emerged from these questions. They included time, staff morale, and how to do the work. When discussing solutions to these challenges, principals cited collaboration, learning with teams, and principal actions such as being a creative leader.
Staff morale was described as the greatest challenge by Principal 9 in the following statement.

The greatest challenge was keeping everyone positive and staff turnover after the first year of this process. Not everyone can see the road ahead and the end result, so the changing of the mindset that comes with this knowledge was too much for some educators. I was personally attached to this work, so how each person felt about this work was a direct link to how they also felt about me. The staff that stuck through this now have such a tight bond and a like mindset for all of the work we continue to do for our kids.

Further, Principal 9 gave an example of collaboration as a response to resolving the challenge of staff morale, “We continued to push through the meetings and implementing the practices. When the teachers began to see their class data improve, the work began to speak for itself and the teachers began trusting the process”.

Another theme, time, was noted as a challenge by Principal 7 who said, “Definitely time!! The challenge to find time to meet during the day was the most challenging. When teachers began to ask for this time, it became more imperative that it was needed”.

Principal 2 resolved the challenge of time through principal actions and described the solution in the following way.

It has been all hands on deck. Specialty teachers, along with the assistant principal and I, cover classes to allow teachers to meet. With the pandemic, we can't combine as many students together as we have in the past so we are problem-solving. We are thinking the specialty teachers will go to classrooms 15 minutes before dismissal to supervise classrooms, and teachers can meet on a rotation as the dismissal takes place.

A third theme that emerged as a challenge is how to do the work. Principal 1 stated, “Most of my teachers were singletons so it was challenging to create grade level or departmental teams. I had to learn how to implement PLC in a small school with limited staff”. Finally, learning with teams was a response to resolving the challenge of how to do the work by Principal
I who stated, “I spent time working with staff members on studying the PLC books and research behind it”.

**Table 6**  
*Themes: What would you consider your greatest challenges during implementation? How did you resolve those challenges?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Morale</td>
<td>4/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to do the work</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How is your school different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities?**  
Four themes emerged from this question including culture, collaboration, processes, and an increased focus on learning. Eight of the ten principals included all four themes in their responses. All ten of the principals cited increased collaboration in their responses.

The response from Principal 1 includes examples of all four themes: culture, collaboration, processes, and an increased focus on learning.

The school culture has improved tremendously. The teachers are taking more ownership in their student learning outcomes. Teachers are meeting weekly to develop common assessments, review common assessments, and share best practices. Teachers are using formative assessment to adjust lesson design and delivery to close learning gaps. Students are receiving more academic support and intervention is responsive and appropriate. The school schedule protects PLC time so staff members can collaborate.

Additional responses indicating culture change include:

Principal 9: “We have built a culture of action research and continuously strive for improved student achievement for all students. We have built a school where the teachers have reached a level of professionalism that they are becoming leaders of the work for other schools”. 
Principal 10 – “We have developed a culture of collaboration. Teachers value our time collaborating”.

Additional responses indicating collaboration change include:

Principal 7 - “Teachers work together with purpose to focus on every child's learning”.

Principal 6 – “We have gone from isolation to collaboration! We have become intentional about using results and making decisions for kids. Teachers have had to be transparent about techniques that they were unsure of and willing to learn from one another”.

Additional responses indicating change in processes include:

Principal 3 – “We have moved to a growth mindset, continuous improvement model, strong system of intervention, standards-based recording/reporting, data and research driven, no retentions, few students place in SPED, students are leaving SPED, evidence based collective inquiry method utilized, strong Guiding Coalition”.

Principal 4 – “Students track their data and have a greater accountability in their learning”.

Additional responses indicating an increased focused on learning include:

Principal 2 - “Our school is different because teachers understand that we must meet students where they are in essential learning and move ALL students to higher levels of learning”.

Principal 5 - “We are looking at data more than we ever had. We are more intentional with instruction and with intervention. We also now have a set intervention schedule with times set aside for tier 2 and tier 3 interventions. We are all on the same page instruction wise within our grade levels”.
Table 7
Themes: How is your school different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>10/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>8/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Focus on Learning</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What did you learn about school culture as a result of participation in the process?

Three themes emerged from the responses. Seven out of ten principals stated that the right culture is the most important component for success. Principal 6 stated,

I believe that school culture is the most important piece of the process. Without it you cannot accomplish the work needed to be done….The school is now a place where both staff and students want to be, which is evidenced by our very low number of students who have chosen virtual school this year.

Six out of ten principals stated that learning together is an important component to building a strong school culture. Principal 1 stated,

Before this process, I believed that my actions were the sole contributor to the school culture. I learned that if I was learning with my staff, and we were working interdependently to hold each other mutually accountable for our behaviors that the culture improved.

Principal 8 stated, “Our collaborative teams are having conversations that drive the work. For example, they don’t discuss problems without coming up with action steps to resolve the problem. They also work to sustain practices that are having positive outcomes for our students”.

Two out of ten principals stated that celebrating progress toward goals is important for developing and maintaining the right culture. Principal 2 stated, “I learned that in order to grow and foster school culture, I needed to add more celebrations”.

Table 8

*Themes: What did you learn about school culture as a result of participation in the process?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The right culture is the most important component for success</td>
<td>7/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning together</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrating Progress</td>
<td>2/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question Two**

As shown in Table 9, research question two is answered by including responses from both interviews and questionnaires. *How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?*

Table 9

*Open-Ended Questions Informing Research Question Two*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Open-Ended Questions</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?</td>
<td>How are you different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities in your school?</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you learn during the implementation process?</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me about a time in the process when you were unsure about what to do. How did the uncertainty make you feel?</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What did you learn about yourself as a result of participation in the project?</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* This table illustrates the similarities of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and the interview protocol to question two.

**How are you different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities in your school?** Two themes emerged in the responses. The first, seven of ten principals stated they have moved from being the only leader in the building to a system of shared or distributed leadership. Principal 5 stated, “I have given more leadership roles to my teachers. I feel more like a coach or facilitator instead of a manager”. Principal 3 stated,
Basically, in every way possible. The most visible way is the way I lead. I have a shared/servant leadership style. My Guiding Coalition is so strong that I rarely, if ever, make curricular decisions in isolation. I now look for ways for my staff to lead.

The second theme is a change in their knowledge and capacity as a leader. All ten stated that their knowledge and skills as a leader have grown as a result of implementing the professional learning communities process. Principal 1 stated,

The Professional Learning Communities in my school strengthen my practice as an instructional leader. It changed my leadership style from running a school that had isolated teachers to a culture where teachers are working mutually interdependent of each other. The school culture improved with the implementation of values, norms, and goals. I am more conscious of the school's data, progress monitoring, and deficiencies. I work collaboratively with colleagues to share best practices, review school data, and make plans to improve student outcomes. I am more equipped to provide instructional leadership support and resources to teachers and students.

Principal 6 stated, “I have learned how to become a master at scheduling” and Principal 8 stated “I have a better understanding of the importance of providing clear and meaningful expectations to my staff as well as the importance of maintaining a growth mindset personally and professionally on a more consistent basis”.

Table 10
Themes: How are you different as a result of implementing Professional Learning Communities in your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Move to shared/distributed leadership</td>
<td>7/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in leadership knowledge and capacity</td>
<td>10/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What did you learn during the implementation process? All of the responses included an overarching theme of the importance of culture. Three subthemes emerged in the responses. Six out of ten principals stated that they have learned they have to remain focused on the right work. Principal 2 stated, “I learned that you can't give up on anyone on your staff. Stay the course and stay focused on the right work. Publicly celebrate the small and big wins. Celebrate
and value the strengths of all staff, just like we do with our students, and they will progress in the process”. Principal 4 stated, “Create a timeline and stick to it. You can't implement everything at once. You must be consistent and patient. What is most important for your school? Start there and then layer the learning/action. Don't do it all at once”.

The second subtheme included responses from six out of ten principals who mentioned they learned the importance of shared leadership. Principal 3 stated, “I need to be sure I am cultivating leaders all over the building to ensure sustainability of the process when I'm gone”. Principal 5 stated, “I learned the importance of giving teachers a constant and regular voice”.

The third subtheme, data-based decisions, included responses from four out of ten principals. Principal 5 stated, “I learned the value of making all decisions based on data”. Principal 1 stated, “And data is key. How do you know if it is working? Look at the data and adjust and try again”.

### Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Stay focused on the work</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of Shared leadership</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data-based Decision Making</td>
<td>4/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tell me about a time in the process when you were unsure about what to do. How did the uncertainty make you feel? All of the responses referred to the beginning of the process. They used words to describe how they felt which included: overwhelming, frustration, concerned, insecurity, anxiety, uncertainty, uneasy, and finally feeling of making a mistake by choosing to participate. Principal 3 stated,

I'm just like, trying to absorb every minor word that she says, because in my head I'm thinking I’ve got to know how to do this. You know, I've got to remember this, I’ve got
know how this all fits together….and it's not until much later that you see how it fits into a systematic process.

Principal 8 stated,

Well, I mean, to be honest, I mean, daily, you feel unsure about what to do because there are so many variables...I always use the term emotional rollercoaster, it is an emotional roller coaster because, you know… to really live in it, you have to. I mean, it is a mindset that just that growth mindset to just say, "This is how it is". Um, and you are never going to be able to check off all the boxes, because there's always more that you can do, uh, for the betterment of yourself, your staff, and your, and most importantly, the students.

**What did you learn about yourself as a result of participation in the project?** The prevailing theme (six out of eight principals) that emerged from the responses was learning they need to practice shared or distributed leadership. Principal 9 stated,

I went from being a micromanager and so scared to let go because I was so scared it wouldn't go how it was supposed to… and it's okay for a team to fail, and not just me, it's okay for a team to succeed and not just me. You know, so I was always so scared to give up those strings at first.

Two responses were only stated once, but provided important information for answering the question. Principal 1 recognized their ability as a strong operational leader but realized the need to become a stronger academic leader. This response demonstrates the principal’s awareness of the need for personal adaptations. Principal 6 stated this project revealed a love for and is inspired by change. This response revealed a personal characteristic about leadership that might have otherwise gone unrecognized.

**Table 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learned the need to practice shared/distributed leadership</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to be a strong academic leader</td>
<td>1/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love to implement change</td>
<td>1/8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed after implementing a school improvement initiative. This chapter described the findings addressing the research problem, focusing on the adaptations leaders have to make to champion institutional change and is guided by the following research questions:

*How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?*

*How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?*

The key findings came from an analysis of data of questionnaire and interview responses. Ten principals were chosen for this study because they led schools who participated in cohort one of the Arkansas Department of Education Professional Learning Communities Project. All principals responded to the questionnaire and eight of the ten respondents were interviewed. Data saturation was reached after the first eight so the final two were not interviewed.

Describing the experience of implementing professional learning communities in their schools, leaders responded to questions regarding why they chose to participate, their greatest challenges during implementation, the differences in their school as a result of the implementation, and what they learned about school culture.

The participants chose to participate in the project because of prior knowledge of the professional learning communities process and previous attempts at implementation. Additionally, their greatest challenges during implementation included finding time to collaborate, staff morale, and learning how to do the work.
The participants stated the culture of their schools is the biggest difference as a result of implementation and is much more positive as a result of collaboration, increased focus on whether the students are learning, and improved processes in the school which are responsive to student learning. They also stated they learned that school culture is the most important aspect to successful implementation and is made stronger by learning together and celebrating progress.

Describing the personal changes that occurred as a result of participation in the project the participants responded to questions regarding how they are different, what they learned about the process and themselves as well as how they felt when they were unsure about what to do. The participants all stated their leadership capacity and knowledge increased. Most of them stated this knowledge allowed them to realize their need to practice shared leadership.

Additionally, the participants stated they learned that the school culture is the most important component in the change process and is molded by practicing: shared leadership, data-driven decision making and remaining focused on the right work. All participants referred to the beginning stages of the project as the time when they felt uncertain. They described their feelings by using words such as overwhelming, frustration, concerned, insecurity, anxiety, uncertainty, uneasy, and finally feeling of making a mistake

When describing what they learned about themselves, one of the participants stated a need to become a better academic leader and another stated they realized their love for change. Most of the participants stated they realized their need to practice shared leadership.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was conducted to understand how instructional leaders perceive their leadership changed due to implementing professional learning communities in their schools. Implementation of professional learning communities begins with a framework outlining a process. The ultimate goal of the process is to create culture change within the schools. Changing culture is complex and requires adaptive leadership skills. Fullan (2016) asserted change at the school level is complex, and the principal has little preparation for managing change. This chapter summarizes the study, explores the conclusions, and discusses recommendations for practice and future research.

Summary of the Study

This study's participants were ten instructional leaders who led schools participating in Cohort one of the Arkansas Department of Education Professional Learning Communities Project. Because the study sought to understand the adaptations leaders have to make in leading change initiatives, they explicitly were chosen because they had implemented the same school improvement initiative. All ten participants answered a questionnaire. Following the questionnaire, eight interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Field notes were taken during the interviews to record body language, tone, and other behaviors that the interview transcript could not capture.

The findings of this study could be useful to policymakers and instructional leaders. The findings can help policymakers implement successful school improvement initiatives by informing them of the need for instructional leaders' training for leading the initiative. Finally, the findings will provide a better understanding of instructional leaders of the adaptations they need to lead a change initiative successfully.
Research Question 1: How do instructional leaders describe the experience of implementing Professional Learning Communities within their schools?

Describing the experience of implementing professional learning communities in their schools, leaders responded to questions regarding why they chose to participate, their greatest challenges during implementation, the differences in their school due to implementation, and what they learned about school culture.

The participants stated they chose to participate in the project because of prior knowledge of the professional learning communities process and previous implementation attempts. Additionally, their most significant challenges during implementation included finding time to collaborate, staff morale, and learning how to do the work.

The participants stated that culture is the most significant difference in their schools as a result of implementation. Furthermore, the culture is much more positive due to collaboration, increased focus on whether the students are learning, and improved processes in the school that are responsive to student learning. They also stated they learned that school culture is the most critical aspect of successful implementation and is made stronger by learning together and celebrating progress.

The participants’ previous unsuccessful attempts at implementation combined with the near-unanimous responses regarding culture as the most significant change in their school and near-unanimous responses regarding culture as the most crucial component for successful implementation draws from the literature findings on the importance of culture changes in adaptive leadership. The previous implementation attempts failed to move beyond technical changes and did not address the culture. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) stated that, without addressing the culture, the change initiative would not become the organization's norm.
Additionally, Fullan (2002) argued that reculturing comprises the essential component in understanding change; Fullan asserted, "Reculturing is the name of the game. Much change is structural and superficial. Transforming culture-changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it-leads to deep lasting change” (pp. 17-18).

**Research Question 2: How do instructional leaders describe the personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated?**

Describing the personal changes that occurred as a result of participation in the project, the participants responded to questions regarding how they are different, what they learned about the process and themselves, and how they felt when they were unsure about what to do.

The participants all stated that their leadership capacity and knowledge increased. This finding is consistent with claims by Heifetz et al. (2009) that effective leaders not only work within their current skillset but also work to enhance their skillset. Additionally, Wagner (2006) asserted that school leaders must remain vulnerable with what they do not know, and their learning must intersect with a goal in such a way that any steps short of achieving the goal will compromise the success of the initiative. Most of the participants stated that their increased knowledge led them to realize their need to practice shared leadership.

Additionally, the participants stated they learned that the school culture is the essential component in the change process and is molded by practicing: shared leadership, data driven decision making and remaining focused on the right work. The importance of culture is addressed above in the discussion of research question one. Shared leadership, data-driven decision making, and remaining focused on the right work are components of the professional learning communities process (Stoll et al. 2006 and Hord 2009).
All participants referred to the beginning stages of the project when they felt the most uncertain. They described their feelings with words such as overwhelming, frustration, concerned, insecurity, anxiety, uncertainty, uneasy, and finally, feeling of making a mistake. Heifetz and Linsky, along with Nelson and Squires, discuss the difficulty of leading change initiatives due to topics' complexity.

When describing what they learned about themselves, one of the participants stated a need to become a better academic leader, and another stated they realized their love for leading change. Most of the participants stated that they realized their need to practice shared leadership. These findings are supported by Heifetz and Laurie (2011), who argued, “Solutions to adaptive problems in schools are not found in the leaders but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions” (p.58).

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study were determined based on the findings of each research question.

1. Concerning the description of the experience of implementing professional learning communities, when professional learning communities are only partially implemented, typically the components implemented are technical or structural and do not result in positive academic outcomes for students. DuFour and Reeves (2016) refer to this type of implementation as “PLC Lite”. Additionally, the culture of the school must be developed and nurtured for successful implementation.

2. Concerning personal changes that implementing Professional Learning Communities necessitated, the participants’ perceptions regarding the need to develop a shared
leadership style was seen as an important change. They also reported an increased understanding of how their behavior impacts the culture of the school.

**Recommendations**

**For Practice**

This study focused on the changes instructional leaders need to make within themselves to lead a school improvement initiative. The school improvement initiative the participants of this study implemented is professional learning communities; however, the results could apply to any school improvement initiative. School improvement initiatives often fail due to instructional leaders treating adaptive challenges as if they are technical challenges. Instructional leaders need knowledge regarding the differences in technical and adaptive challenges. Further, they need to have an understanding of those differences so they can recognize the challenge and respond appropriately. Finally, instructional leaders need to recognize the times when a challenge requires both technical and adaptive leadership skills. Leadership preparation programs could provide training on adaptive leadership, and instructional leaders who have successfully led a change initiative could provide mentoring.

**For Further Research**

Further research of changes required of instructional leaders when leading a school improvement initiative should expand beyond cohort one of the Arkansas Department of Education Professional Learning Communities Project. Researching the changes made by instructional leaders in other cohorts could enhance the findings of this study. Additionally, researching the changes made by leaders when implementing other school improvement initiatives could expand this study's findings, making them more generalizable.
The expansion of this study into a mixed methods study could integrate student achievement and student engagement data. Measuring student outcomes would provide insight into the effectiveness of the changes made by the leaders. Additionally, the outcomes could inform instructional leaders' future practices when implementing school improvement initiatives.

**Discussion**

For too many years, policymakers have issued directives to educators to improve student achievement, and schools have diligently tried implementing a myriad of initiatives with limited success. Many of these initiatives lack investment in relevant education and professional development for teachers and principals. Additionally, enhancing school culture is rarely the focus of change initiatives. Perhaps because culture change is difficult to measure, it is a long-term process, and often requires individuals to confront their educational imperatives; it is often ignored. The respondents in this study acknowledged the necessity of focusing on the long-term initiatives that require learning and adaptation.

There is a plethora of educational consultants and materials devoted to improving school outcomes. They often promise to turn around the school by improving the outcomes for student achievement. While it might be expedient to spend money on “the next newest silver bullet” for education improvement, this study suggests that instead of abandoning initiatives, implementing adaptive leadership practices can improve the likelihood of success. Most of all, the likelihood of success depends on how well the instructional leader can apply adaptive leadership practices in their schools.

**Implications for Novice Researchers**

The process of completing the required course work and writing a dissertation to earn a doctorate in Adult and Lifelong Learning forced this practitioner into growth both personally and
professionally. Professionally, this growth provided the ability to recognize credible and reliable research by asking better questions and listening more profoundly, searching for meaning. Personally, this growth provided much needed reflection through unanticipated and uncontrollable delays. This researcher learned the value of collecting, examining, and analyzing evidence when making decisions of practice. A practitioner, and indeed a novice researcher, the skills acquired through the dissertation process provide the belief that one can and should be both a practitioner and a researcher.

**Chapter summary**

Implementing school improvement initiatives is not a new phenomenon. Implementing professional learning communities is not a new phenomenon. However, studying the adaptations leaders must make in themselves when implementing professional learning communities adds to the school improvement initiative literature. Most instructional leaders in the study reported that the most significant change was their realization of the need to practice shared or distributed leadership. They also reported a new realization of the importance of the school culture and its impact on the success of the initiative.

Instructional leaders will continue to be tasked with the responsibility of leading school improvement initiatives. Indeed they should be the leaders of change in their schools. However, this leads to the conclusion that successful implementation will require them to be open to learning how to implement adaptive change and, more importantly, recognize when the situation calls for them to utilize adaptive change skills.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Instructional Leaders

Xxxxx x, 2020

Dear Principal Xxxxxx Xxxxxxx,

My name is Tina Smith, a current doctoral student in the Department of Adult and Lifelong Learning at the University of Arkansas. I am writing to ask for your participation in my qualitative case study: “Professional Learning Communities and Adaptive Change”. Your participation in this study will bring valuable insight to how instructional leaders change as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative.

If you choose to participate, your participation will be voluntary and you can withdraw your participation at any time. Participation will require the completion of a short questionnaire along with an interview that will take no longer than 60 minutes. Confidentiality will be protected at all times, and no identifiable information will be shared at any time.

Please indicate your wishes regarding participation on the attached informed consent. If you choose not to participate, please respond to this email telling me you will not participate. If you are willing, please complete the informed consent, print, sign and email a copy of the signed to me by (insert date here).

Thank you for your consideration. I hope you can find time in your schedule and are willing to participate. If you would like to discuss any aspects of the study, you may reach me via email at tlvest.smith@gmail.com. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Kit Kacirek, at kitk@uark.edu.

Kind regards,

Tina Smith
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Implementing Change: A Case Study of Adaptive Leadership

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Tina Smith, Doctoral Student, Adult and Lifelong Learning EdD
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kit Kacirek, Associate Professor, Adult and Lifelong Learning,
University of Arkansas

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE
You are invited to participate in a research study about how instructional leaders change as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative. You are being asked to participate in this study because you participated a three year school improvement initiative that began in August of 2017 and concluded in May of 2020.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?
Tina Smith

Who is the Faculty Advisor?
Dr. Kit Kacirek
Associate Professor of Adult and Lifelong Learning

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this study is to understand how instructional leaders perceived their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative.

Who will participate in this study?
The participants are Principals of ten schools who participated in the same school improvement initiative.

What am I being asked to do?
Your participation will require the following: The completion of a 15 item questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guided by four questions. Field notes will be taken by the researcher
during the interviews and the interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of your statements.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
There are no anticipated risks or discomforts identified with your participation in study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
Other than the potential benefits to future leaders informing them about the adaptive changes necessary when leading a school improvement initiative there are no anticipated benefits to participating in the study.

How long will the study last?
The time commitment will be:
- 10-15 minutes for a 15 item questionnaire
- No more than 60 minutes for a semi-structured interview

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?
No compensation will be given for participation in the study.

Will I have to pay for anything?
There will be no cost to you for participation in the study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?
If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. You will not be affected in any adverse way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. Additionally your anonymity will be protected by assigning a code to each participant that will be used instead of your name.

Will I know the results of the study?
At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Kit Kacirek at kitk@uark.edu or Principal Researcher, Tina Smith at tleveland.smith@gmail.com. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed above for any concerns that you may have. You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature Date
Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. What is your highest level of education?

2. How long have you been a principal at your current school?

3. In what geographic region is your school located?

4. What grade levels are represented in your school?

5. How many students attend your school?

6. How many teachers are in your school?

7. What percent of students at your school are on free and reduced lunches?

8. What percent of students at your school are in special education?

9. What percent of students at your school are English learners?

10. How are you different as a result of implementing professional learning communities in your school?

11. How is your school different as a result of implementing professional learning communities?

12. What would you consider your greatest challenges during implementation?

13. How did you resolve those challenges?

14. What did you learn during the implementation process?
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Professional Learning Communities and Adaptive Change

Time of interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewee:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about understanding how instructional leaders perceived their leadership changed as a result of implementing a school improvement initiative.

I brought a copy of your informed consent. You may re-read it before we begin the interview. As noted in the informed consent, your identity will be protected throughout the process. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any time.

Do you have questions before we begin?

Do I have your permission to begin the interview?

Questions:

1. Why did you participate in the professional learning communities project?

2. Tell me about a time in the process when you were unsure about what to do. How did the uncertainty make you feel?

3. What did you learn about yourself as a result of participation in the project?

4. What did you learn about school culture as a result of participation in the process?
Appendix E: Approved IRB

To: Tina Lynn Smith
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 07/27/2020
Action: Expedited Approval
Action Date: 07/27/2020
Protocol #: 2006271187
Study Title: Implementing Change: A Case Study of Adaptive Leadership
Expiration Date: 07/16/2021

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kit Kacirek, Investigator
Appendix F: Audit Trail Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question: How do instructional leaders describe the experience of</td>
<td>What did you learn about school culture as a result of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implementing PLCs within their schools?</td>
<td>participation in the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Before this process, I believed that my actions were the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sole contributor to the school culture. I learned that</td>
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<td></td>
<td>if I was learning with my staff and we were working</td>
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<td></td>
<td>interdependently holding each other mutually accountable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>for our behaviors that the culture improved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>School culture has to be right for this process to work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and is the heart of any change process. I learned that</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in order to grow and foster school culture I needed to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>add more celebrations. Our culture is positive not only</td>
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<td></td>
<td>for the teachers and students, but also for the families</td>
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<td></td>
<td>who attend our school. One example of our positive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>culture is our “welcome wagon”. Because this and other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>practices we are able to more quickly develop</td>
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<td></td>
<td>relationships and meet the needs of our students in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>trauma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>The biggest thing I learned is that this process will</td>
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<td></td>
<td>not work without a strong, positive school culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We started the process with a culture of willingness to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>learn and this process has strengthened that culture.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Our guiding coalition leads and sets the tone of the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>culture. They are comfortable talking to staff who have</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beliefs and practices that don’t fit our mission and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vision and helping find ways for them to learn</td>
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<td></td>
<td>together. An example of their leadership is leading</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PLC and RTI overviews for new staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>I believe that school culture is the most important</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>piece of the process. Without it you cannot</td>
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<td></td>
<td>accomplish the work needed to be done. I learned that</td>
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<td></td>
<td>knowing your people is one of the most important</td>
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<td></td>
<td>components of school culture. I also learned that</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>celebrating progress toward goals is very important.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In the beginning I didn’t realize that we weren’t</td>
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<td></td>
<td>celebrating enough. Since that time I have empowered</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a team who are great at celebration to make sure we are</td>
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<td></td>
<td>more focused in that area. The school is now a place</td>
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<td></td>
<td>where both staff and students want to be which is</td>
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<td></td>
<td>evidenced by our very low number of students who have</td>
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<td></td>
<td>chosen virtual school this year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>I learned that as teacher efficacy increased the culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>of the school has shifted to collaborative process that</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>increases the effectiveness of all teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>School culture is never ending. We are constantly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>working on it. The biggest change in our culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>has been in communication which I believe that good</td>
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<td>communication is key in maintain a strong culture both</td>
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<td>within the school and with the parents and community.</td>
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<td>Our collaborative teams are having conversations that</td>
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<td>drive the work. For example, they don’t discuss</td>
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<td></td>
<td>problems without coming up with action steps to resolve</td>
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<td></td>
<td>the problem. They also work to sustain practices that</td>
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<td></td>
<td>are having positive outcomes for our students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>I learned that culture “is the heartbeat” and the way</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you do things. This is a school where everyone is on</td>
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<td></td>
<td>the same page; we work collaboratively to ensure all</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students are learning. The culture of the school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>transformed from “everyone being at a job, to being at</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>their home” all working to achieve the same goal. Our</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>teachers trust each other and our parents trust the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>teachers. Our culture has helped us problem solve ways</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to continue to meet our student’s needs even with the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>constraints due to the pandemic.</td>
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</table>
I believe that in order to have a good school culture you have to respect people’s time. I was fortunate because our district had implemented block scheduling which provided 90 minutes a day for collaborative teams to meet and learn together. The structure of the process provided guidance on how best to use the time. The culture of the school grew a lot of potential leaders. When the process is imbedded, it is like leaving a legacy. The process will continue even if I leave.