Investigating the link between a middle-level geography professional learning community and classroom practice

Hazel Ellie Reitz

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ABSTRACT

INVESTIGATING THE LINK BETWEEN A MIDDLE-LEVEL GEOGRAPHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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This phenomenological case study examined the link between teacher practice within the classroom and a newly implemented middle school social studies Professional Learning Community (PLC). More specifically, the use of mandates, theories, and activities were investigated through a series of teacher interviews, classroom observations, post-observation discussions, and PLC observations. The participants included in this study were from one seventh grade geography PLC, consisting of ten members, three of which agreed to be further interviewed and observed. Member checking, peer reviews, and a reflexive journal were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, and open and selective coding were used to analyze data.

In a climate where social studies, and particularly geography education, is not a priority and many teachers are often under qualified to teach specific content, PLCs can provide schools with continued, challenging, and quality support by using the expertise of teachers within their own building. The findings of this research suggest that teachers value time spent within their PLCs, and their knowledge, classroom activities, and attitude toward the subject of social studies changed in a positive way because of the PLC. The researcher found that teachers were willing and eager to improve classroom instruction, if they were provided the time for collaboration. Also, the way PLCs are implemented matters: schools should keep in mind theories on
educational change, allow teachers to determine the course of their PLCs, provide teachers more time for coaching one another, incorporate theory and best practices into collaboration time, and encourage teachers to develop support networks beyond the realm of the building. Professional Learning Communities have the potential to provide students with a quality social studies education.
INVESTIGATING THE LINK BETWEEN A MIDDLE-LEVEL GEOGRAPHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

BY

HAZEL “ELLIE” REITZ
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Doctoral Director:
Mary Beth Henning
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Thank you to my sweet family: to Brian, who was always there to pick up the slack, continues to support any goals I have, and has made life so much fun, and to my babies, Chase and Ava: you have provided me with more happiness than I ever thought possible. I look forward to all of the adventures to come, and I want you both to know you can do anything you set out to do. Also, it does take a village.

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DEDICATION

For my babies, Chase and Ava
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF APPENDICES</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Change</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement and Research Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of Social Studies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Social Studies</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Social Studies</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies Education</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices in Social Studies</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices in Social Studies Assessments</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices in Geography Education</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Practices in Geography Assessments</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards for Professional Development</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies Professional Development</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography Education Professional Development</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Knowledge</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Knowledge</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Partnerships</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Collaboration to Improve Teaching</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially Constructed Learning</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learners</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solid Foundation for PLCs</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Teams</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Assessments</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Change</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and Capacity Building</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Changing Context</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Action and Engagement</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC Implementation</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Results of PLCs</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Results of PLCs</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological Case Study</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing the Researcher’s Experience</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River Middle School</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observations</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Observation Conferences</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC Observations</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility Check</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PARTICIPANTS IN CONTEXT</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter | Page
--- | ---
Introduction of the PLCs | 83
Teacher’s Perceptions of PLCs | 84
District Support and Priorities | 87
Seventh Grade PLC | 88
Mr. John Brown | 99
Mrs. Sue Smith | 91
Mrs. Barbara Jones | 92
Conclusion | 94
5. RESULTS | 95
Findings | 96
Research Question 1: Learning Targets and Assessments | 96
District Expectations | 97
District Targets | 98
Learning the content | 100
Background knowledge | 101
Finding answers | 102
Developing Assessments | 104
Chapter | Page
--- | ---
Reviewing Assessment Data | 109

Research Question 2: Educational Theory in PLCs | 115

Textbook vs. Multiple Resources | 117

Multiple resources | 118

Levels of Thinking | 120

Cooperative Learning | 122

Interdisciplinary Ideas | 124

Integrating science | 124

Integrating math | 124

Integrating language arts | 125

World Concept | 126

Research Question 3: Creating and Evaluating Common Lessons | 129

Common Activities | 129

Higher Level Thinking with Maps | 132

Beyond memorization | 132

Mapping debates | 135

Mapping activities | 136
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Strategies .......................................................................</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion ..................................................................................</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CONCLUSION ............................................................................</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Research Study ..................................................</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions .......................................................................</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Findings ................................................................</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Influence through Discussions, Mandates, and Activities ............</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Expectations .....................................................................</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments .................................................................................</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Educational Theories and Debates ..........................................</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Theory ....................................................................</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textbook vs. Multiple Resources ................................................</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of Thinking ........................................................................</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Learning .....................................................................</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Lessons ................................................................</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Concept ................................................................................</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Instructional Activities in PLCs and Classrooms ......................</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Activities</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Strategies</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed Administrative Focus</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching and Observations</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study of Best Practices and Theory</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Connections for Experienced Teachers</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Demographics of Participants</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. PLC OBSERVATION PROTOCOL</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. POST-OBSERVATION CONFERENCE PROTOCOL</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. ADMINISTRATION INTRODUCTION LETTER</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. TEACHER INTRODUCTION LETTER</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. TEACHER CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. PLC CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. SAMPLE REFLEXIVE JOURNALS</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

It is now an undeniable conclusion that the education system and its partners have failed to produce citizens who can contribute to and benefit from a world that offers enormous opportunity. (Fullan, 2007, p.7)

Fullan (2007) does not place blame in this quotation, but his message is clear: American students are not developing an understanding of the world, of themselves, or the ability to effectively participate in a global society. Without a quality social studies education within the public school system, the health of the United States democracy is in danger (Neumann, 2017; White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007; Zamosky, 2008). Schools are placed under enormous pressure, including national and state mandates in reading, writing, math, and science, while social studies is not given priority (Baldi, Warner-Griffin, & Tadler, 2015; Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Hobbs & Moroz, 2001; Lintner, 2006).

Furthermore, due to the lack of social studies and specifically, geography education, the National Geographic publication: A road map for 21st century geography education: Assessment suggests the well-being of our society is at risk:

The poor state of geography education in America is a threat to our country’s well-being, and by extension, to the well-being of the global community. The partners share the belief that geography education is essential for preparing the general population for careers, civic lives, and personal decision making in contemporary society. They also believe it is essential for the preparation of specialists capable of addressing critical societal issues in the areas of social welfare, economic stability, environmental health, and international relations. They fear that by neglecting geography education today, we are placing the welfare of future generations at risk. (Edelson, Shavelson, & Wertheim, 2013, p. 7).
This report paints a dismal picture regarding the health of our society, all in relation to the lack of social studies education within our country. The priority of civic and world education is now falling under the hands of individual districts. But because it does not tend to be a focus for districts, social studies teachers at the middle school level have been found to be teaching out of their area of expertise; in some instances, as many as “52-91 percent of students in the social science subfields are taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in the main assignment field” (Thomas-Brown, Shaffer, & Werner, 2016, p. 30). Instead of allowing social studies to fall behind, some schools are looking for budget-conscious solutions, such as teacher collaboration, to improve student learning (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 2008).

While districts throughout the country spend large amounts of money contracting out professional development for teachers, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) argue, “The most important resource in every school is the professionals within it” (p. 42). The professional development or continuing education of teachers is a profitable business, one in which teachers can be subjected to great amounts of lectures and seemingly irrelevant information. Instead of planning elaborate institute days and meetings, school districts should be looking inward; teachers themselves can provide invaluable contributions to other teachers. Teacher collaboration within grade level and subject area can provide teachers with new ideas and lead to improvement in student learning (DuFour, 2004). McGee (2016) noted that when teachers engage in collaborative activities and discussions surrounding curriculum and student work, changes in teaching practices are observed. Furthermore, Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) found that when “intensive, sustained, and content specific” professional development with a social studies focus was provided for teachers, the teachers “felt more confident and competent
in teaching social studies content, utilized provided resources to enhance and extend instruction, and developed a sense of community amongst each other” (p. 69). Collaborative professional development can prove to be invaluable when teachers are forced to teach subjects or topics they know little about.

While collaboration within schools is not a new concept, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010) define a particular type, Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The main purpose of PLCs is ensuring students are learning rather than just being taught. To accomplish the goal of PLCs, schools must establish a collaborative culture in which teachers are engaging in teams to establish common goals. Teachers then assess the success of the goals by using evidence from students to improve teaching (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many). By implementing various forms of collaboration within schools and moving the focus to student learning, teaching can greatly improve. Instead of trying to bring in experts to improve teaching strategies, schools are using their most available and able assets.

Educators working in isolation often find it difficult to meet the needs of their students due to goals imposed on them by others. Secluded teachers “are less likely to demonstrate the confidence, persistence, and resilience essential to sustained improvement” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010, p. 11). A departure from old norms, in-service training, and teacher-centered classrooms is essential. Professional development should include capacity-building focused on teachers’ learning in a collaborative environment (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Each teacher should have the opportunity to improve his or her own background knowledge, skill, and practice while given the time to brainstorm with other educators.
Ultimately, teachers are the ones who determine what is being taught in their classrooms and how that material is delivered (Thorton, 2005). They are forced to strike a balance between engaging students with meaningful activities and fulfilling an extreme number of national, state, and district mandates. However, when teachers do not have the content knowledge, a variety of lesson plans, and enthusiasm for the subject, student learning of social studies and their enjoyment of the subject suffer (Chiodo & Byford, 2004).

Teachers who lack preparation tend to rely on rote, automatic methods of instruction that are less likely to meet the needs of students who need the most assistance (Darling-Hammond, 2006b). This textbook-driven style of teaching results in students becoming disenchanted with learning and seeing social studies as irrelevant and unrelated to their future, particularly those who are already struggling (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001). Furthermore, social studies is not taught with quality or consistency within schools due to the need to make time for tested subjects such as mathematics and reading (Lintner, 2006; Vogler, Linter, Lipscomb, Knopf, Heafner, & Rock, 2007). When it comes to the specific subject of world geography, which is often taught at the middle school level, “the amount of geography instruction that students receive, the preparation of their teachers to teach geography, and the quality of instructional materials are inadequate to prepare students for the demands of the modern world” (Bednarz, Heffron, & Huynh, 2013, p. 7). Providing teachers with time for collaboration with a focus on student learning may bridge the gap between a demanding curriculum and engaged teaching in social studies.

The success of PLCs has been measured quantitatively through student test scores, but missing is the link between PLCs and teacher practice (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek,
2010). By understanding this link through the eyes of the teacher, the potential of Professional Learning Communities can be better understood.

Conceptual Framework

To identify how teachers respond to PLCs and link PLCs to classroom practice, the researcher has developed her conceptual framework around the ideas of DuFour’s (2004) definition of Professional Learning Communities and Fullan’s (2007) philosophy of teacher change.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities try to move schools from an assumed teacher-centered ideology to classrooms focused on student learning. DuFour (2004) identifies three ideas upon which PLCs are based: teachers should work on their own learning instead of teaching, collaborate with one another about learning, and ensure accountability so continual improvement is possible. Instead of a one-shot workshop, PLCs are “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” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 4). Within PLCs, teachers use team time to share teaching practices, learn interventions, and assess the attainment of the school’s common goals. Time is built into the traditional school schedule to allow for this collaboration, providing teachers with additional support and guaranteed opportunities to engage in critical dialogue with colleagues (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). This crucial dialogue is not limited to ideas of classroom instruction, but
should also include chances of brainstorming interventions with support staff and devising solutions to meet the needs of students with particular needs (DuFour, 2004). PLCs have the potential to promote or instigate positive changes if they have a common foundation, develop collaborative communities, and focus on results to guide instruction (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010).

**Teacher Change**

Fullan (2005a) believes that a misunderstanding of the change process is a key ingredient in most failed school reforms. More specifically, “the presence of change knowledge does not guarantee success, but its absence ensures failure” (p. 54). When schools, including administrators, teachers, and additional stakeholders, do not understand the change process, they are destined to feel frustration and often conclude change is not working or not possible. For example, stakeholders often assume change is immediate, and if they are under that expectation, they will feel frustration and failure. Change must occur for specific reasons, including a commitment to students and a larger moral obligation to the community. Teachers must also be seen as the instigators of change, and administration should put power into the hands of teachers. As Fullan (2007) notes, “This new professionalism is collaborative, not autonomous, open rather than closed; outward-looking rather than insular; and authoritative but not controlling” (p. 296). Gone are the days of forced administrative implementation for the sake of a new trend, but instead change should take place as a result of collaborative decision-making for the greater good of the community.
Fullan (2006) built his change plan based on theories of action with merit. Change can occur after “seven core premises” (p. 8) are understood, including motivation, capacity building, contextual learning, changing contexts, reflexive bias, tri-level engagement, and persistence. These core principles allow school leaders and teachers to understand what to expect in the face of change, while giving structure and guidance to the plans.

Problem Statement

Coinciding with the emphasis on test scores, the subject of social studies has taken a back seat to other subject areas, such as reading and math (Baldi et al., 2015; Lintner, 2006; Vogler et al., 2007; White et al., 2007). Middle school teachers are presented with a particular challenge because regardless of their background and interests, most graduate with social studies certification. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (n.d.), after only five courses total in any combination of psychology, sociology, history, geography, or political science, teachers can gain a social studies endorsement in the state of Illinois. Further, if teachers are only teaching one period, a mere three classes are needed to fulfill state certification. Therefore, instead of hiring a social studies teacher, middle school educators are often asked to teach just one period of social studies with the understanding it will not be their full-time teaching focus. Teachers are being asked to teach outside of their content areas in favor of tested areas, resulting in a staff that becomes more reliant on teaching methods centered on a textbook (Vogler et al.). Attempting to understand the link between state testing and administrator priority, Lintner conducted a study to examine the impact of no testing in social studies. He found that principals “approached social studies with resigned compliance rather than rejuvenated creativity,” ranking
the overall importance of the subject last out of all academic subjects (p. 7). Furthermore, he noted that “social studies in general are undervalued, undesired, underfunded and undertaught” (p. 3). The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 2007) blames these alarming trends on the fact that social studies is not a tested subject, citing, “If it isn’t tested, it isn’t taught” (para 2).

Teaching outside of the content area requires professionals to go out of their comfort zone and muddle through an unfamiliar and vast curriculum. Also, it frequently results in teaching from the textbook and rote memorization, due to the fact instructors themselves do not know the very concepts they are teaching (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001). Because of this textbook-driven instruction, students are developing negative opinions of social studies (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Hobbs & Moroz; Russell & Waters, 2010). It is these negative opinions about social studies that have the potential to wreak havoc, as citizens are not being educated about civic rights, responsibilities, and freedoms (White et al., 2007). Furthermore, “when citizens lack sufficient knowledge, skills, and virtues for political participation, the vitality of democracy is at risk” (Neumann, 2017, p. 5). When teachers lack content knowledge and strategies for engaging students in this particular subject area, the students’ learning of social studies suffers.

Furthermore, to determine student learning, schools often equate higher test scores with good professional development, skipping over the assessment of implementation (Guskey, 2000). When schools are too focused on the test scores, data, or outcomes, PLCs have the potential to fail (Sims & Penny, 2014). This finding paints an inaccurate picture of the effectiveness of teacher learning. The teaching practices that PLCs encourage have not been studied at the middle school level. By observing teachers within same-subject, same-grade teacher teams at the middle school social studies level and examining how sessions of
collaboration translate into classroom teaching, a greater understanding can be reached regarding the impact PLCs have on teacher instruction.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to examine teachers’ perceptions and classroom integration of ideas shared within one middle school social studies Professional Learning Community. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influence teachers to change their classroom practices?
2. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?
3. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?

Methodology

To complete an in-depth study that allowed for a variety of research tools, qualitative research met the needs of this study because “qualitative methods are used in research that is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice, or setting” (Mertens, 2010, p. 225). The researcher studied teachers and the grouping of PLCs within their natural setting and attempted to interpret the phenomena of PLCs through the eyes of those teachers (Mertens, 2010). Case studies describe interventions as they are happening, illustrate various topics, and enlighten assorted unintended outcomes of the intervention (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009).
To complete this study, the participants were asked to participate based on willingness and a recent implementation of the PLC methodology. Additionally, this school followed the middle school model that emphasizes interdisciplinary teaming as described by the AMLE (2010). Three teachers within one grade-level social studies PLC agreed to participate and luckily, represented a sample of the overall population of social studies teachers (Patton, 2002).

To collect data, multiple sources of evidence were used. These included teacher interviews, PLC observations, teacher observations, and post-observation conferences. Seidmen’s (2006) three interview structure was followed, in which interviews were staggered over an extended period of time, questions were repeated in each interview, and additional questions were added depending on emerging themes (Appendix A). PLC observations were completed six times to identify indicators from the teacher-leader or administrator about the goals and purpose of the PLC (Appendix B). Classroom observations were also completed six times with each teacher, with the goal of realizing the link between the teachers’ perceived implementation and actual practice. Indicators identified within PLC meetings and teacher interviews drove the classroom observation analysis (Appendix C). An observation protocol was created with the goal of collecting data as objectively as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, to better understand the teacher methodology behind the classroom lessons, post-observation conferences were completed four times with each teacher, during which a similar series of questions was asked (Appendix D). Member checking and peer reviewers were used to ensure the validity of the data, and a chain of events was provided to help the reader understand how conclusions were reached (Yin, 2009).
To analyze the data, open coding was used, during which trends were identified and themes prioritized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews and field notes were coded to identify themes within the PLC, teachers’ perceptions, and classroom instruction. From this, axial coding was used to identify details about PLCs with a focus on creating subcategories (Lincoln & Guba). Selective coding and prioritizing themes were then used to develop categories identifying the relationships among the PLC and the collected data (Patton, 2002). Finally, cross-case synthesis allowed the researcher to compare data from different teachers and the classroom observations (Yin, 2009). It allowed the researcher to provide insight as to why changes occurred in some areas and not others. This methodology will be expounded upon in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

While the success of PLCs has been measured quantitatively through student test scores (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010), the impact PLCs have on teacher instruction is largely unknown, particularly at the middle school level with teachers who have limited social studies experience. If PLCs are able to provide more in-depth knowledge of the curricular material while encouraging teachers to use more student-centered, research-based teaching styles, these collaborative groups could possibly hold the solution to the low quality of social studies teaching currently observed throughout the country.

This study is also needed because of the current lack of quality social studies teaching at the middle school level (Moroz, 1995; Neumann, 2017; Russell & Waters, 2010; White et al., 2007). This is not a fault of the teachers but rather the result of a nation-wide movement toward improving test scores in other subject areas. Social studies is falling behind when it comes to
priority (Baldi et al., 2015), and as a result, students are not finding the subject meaningful (Vogler et al., 2007). Teachers tasked with teaching social studies are often lacking appropriate certification (Thomas-Brown, Shaffer, & Werner, 2016) or are certified because courses they took in college fell under the large heading of social science (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Therefore, the educators teaching socials studies may not have the necessary background information or instructional strategies necessary to effectively teach the course. Without the skills learned in social studies, and specifically geography, the future of our democracy and role in a global society could be in danger:

Without explicit intervention and a dedicated focus on geographic literacy by educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers, U.S. children will be unable to thrive in the global marketplace, unlikely to connect with and care for their natural environment, and unsure about how to relate to people from other parts of the world. One thing is abundantly clear; if American children hope to participate in our democracy and play a strong leadership role in our world, they must possess geographic knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Simply put, if our children are not taught to think geographically, their success and the success of our nation and world in the 21st century are in jeopardy. (Schell, Roth, & Mohan, 2013, p. 123)

By understanding the potential that collaboration has to change teacher practices, the subject of social studies has the potential to become an engaging and enriching subject once again (Thomas-Brown et al., 2016).

After conducting teacher-observations within PLC teams and examining how PLCs translate into classroom teaching, a greater understanding was reached regarding the impact PLCs have on teacher instruction. Additionally, through a series of teacher interviews, insight was achieved into reasons teachers were choosing to use, or not use, ideas shared within PLCs to teach social studies. As teachers make the ultimate decisions of how and what to teach in their
classrooms, their perceptions of PLCs and their usefulness are imperative in determining if PLCs can bridge a gap between curricular expectation and classroom implementation.

**Delimitations**

This phenomenological case study was limited to three teachers within one social studies PLC in a suburban middle school. These teachers represented a purposeful sample, varying in years of experience with social studies and in the teaching field, yet were also the only three teachers that agreed to be observed and interviewed. Only one Professional Learning Community was observed within the school, with the goal of developing rich, descriptive, qualitative data. These small numbers made the research manageable and more in-depth, as the process involved multiple interviews and observations that took place over a period of three months.

**Limitations**

The researcher selected a school within the first few years of its PLC implementation. Therefore, the results of the study are particular to the school and context. Furthermore, while the three subjects reflected a variance in teaching, there was a lack of cultural differentiation and diversity. The research was limited to three teachers out of the ten members of the 7th grade geography PLC, as those were the only that agreed to the more in-depth portions of the research project.

The researcher also had a particular passion for the subject as a social studies teacher, which had the potential to reflect biases. The researcher’s passion about the subject did not
hinder the results but rather allowed the results to reflect a pragmatic description of what this newer form of professional development looked like.

Assumptions

This study was conducted under the assumptions that during interviews, the teachers were truthful and honest. Additionally, the researcher was under the assumption that observations of PLC meetings and classroom teacher were representative of typical daily activities and were not modified because of the presence of the researcher. Research participants were amiable to the researcher and honest, and she was under the assumption they did not tell her what she wanted to hear, but what was really happening. By immersing herself in this phenomenon, the researcher was desensitized to the subjects and students, so the observations reflect an accurate picture of what is truly happening within the participants’ middle school social studies classrooms.

Definitions

Professional Learning Communities offer a different approach to professional development within middle school social studies classrooms. To better understand the possibilities associated with formal collaboration among the teachers, common definitions must be established.

Educational Theory and Practice: Fullan (2007) notes that educational change and innovation is multidimensional and composed of three components:
1. The possible use of new or revised materials (instructional resources such as curriculum materials or technologies)
2. The possible use of new teaching approaches (i.e., new teaching strategies or activities), and
3. The possible alteration of beliefs (e.g., pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying particular new policies or programs. (p. 30).

Therefore, by investigating the districts’ mandates, educational theory, and discussion of practice, including activities, and tying back this information to the PLC discussions, a greater understanding can be reached regarding the impact of PLCs on the participants’ classrooms.

Darling-Hammond (2006a) acknowledges that while educational theory often makes up a substantial portion of teacher-education programs, theoretical discussions are often absent once teachers move into the reality of the classroom. Theory can help teachers propose solutions to a variety of problems and critically reflect on best practices in the classrooms (Higgs, 2013). Higgs also notes that the primary purpose of educational theory is to guide educational practice, or

A body of connected principles, counsels, and recommendations...which aims at guiding those engaged in educational activities, in schools and elsewhere. The great writers in educational theory, Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Mill and Dewey, for example, may be thought of as each giving a more or less worked-out body of prescriptions for the guidance of teachers. (Moore, 2012, pp.8)

In this study, topics that guided varying educational practices are referred to as theory.

Educational practice can be defined as the activities a teacher has students complete within a class period. Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) note that after analyzing the achievement scores of many students in a variety of settings,

The most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. In addition, the results show wide variation in effectiveness among teachers. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor. (p. 63)
Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) acknowledge that “individual teachers can have a profound influence on student learning” and identify strategies of effective teachers (p. 3). These include

- Identifying similarities and differences.
- Summarizing and note taking.
- Reinforcing effort and providing recognition.
- Homework and practice.
- Nonlinguistic representation.
- Cooperative learning.
- Setting objectives.
- Providing feedback.
- Generating and testing hypothesis.
- Questions, cues, and advanced organizers. (p. 146)

**Middle Schools:** Middle schools, typically including grades six through eight, are defined by their collaboration with groups of interdisciplinary teachers and focus on the social, intellectual, and emotional development of 11 to 14-year-olds (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; National Council for Social Studies, 1991). Furthermore, according to the Association of Middle Level Educators (2010), an education for young adults should be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable, while curriculum should be challenging, engaging, and collaborative. Instead of having students go from class to class as a high school functions, a middle school team of teachers share a common group of students. The teachers within a team have a common planning time not only to develop interdisciplinary curriculum but also to discuss the various needs of their students with teammates and additional support staff. This way, middle schools are able to encourage collaboration within a group of interdisciplinary teachers, reduce the number of teacher and peer interactions, and develop a sense of small communities within a larger school (Patterson, 2006). When PLCs were first
implemented, it took time away from team planning time. At River Middle School, this was a major change in which teachers used to meet one period a day with their teammates. Team time was used to address various student concerns as well as integrate curriculum, and PLC time means less team time to meet with the core teachers.

Professional Learning Community: While collaboration within schools is not a new concept, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010) coined the term Professional Learning Community (PLC) with the main purpose of focusing on students’ learning rather than what is being taught. To accomplish the goal of PLCs, schools must establish a collaborative culture in which teachers are engaging in teams to establish common goals and further assess the success of the goals thorough evidence from students’ learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many). Teams must create a vision statement, develop norms, and have time to meet with fellow grade and subject-level teachers to assess success and areas that need improvement. Districts within the country have found ways to combine the knowledge of teachers by creating PLCs, greatly improving teacher instruction and student interest (DuFour, 2007; Graham, 2007; Thompson & Mc Kelvy, 2007).

Quality Social Studies: Social studies education develops knowledge, intellect, and values necessary for citizens within a democracy (NCSS, 1991). Curricula within the middle school social studies classrooms vary greatly from sixth to eighth grade, covering the foundation of mankind to modern day America. Within the state of Illinois, typical topics include ancient history in sixth grade, world geography in seventh grade, and American history in the eighth grade. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1991) encourages four common themes

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1 The pseudonym of the research site.
within such units of study: concern with self, concern for right and wrong, concern for others, and concern for the world. Instructional practices of teachers should further encourage the social-emotional needs of the adolescent by using experiential and cooperative learning and heterogeneous grouping; addressing controversial issues, including performance-based assessment; and connecting units of study with students’ individual lives (NCSS, 2007).

**Quality Geography Education:** According to *Geography For Life* (2012), “A geographically informed person [is] someone who sees meaning in the arrangement of things on Earth’s surface, who sees relations between people, places, and environments, who uses geographic skills, and who applies spatial and ecological perspectives to life situations” (Heffron & Downs, p. 7).

Geography was the curricular focus of this particular 7th grade PLC that agreed to be the subjects of this study. Within this subject, students should ask geographic questions, acquire organize, and analyze that information, and answer geographic questions using inductive and deductive reasoning (Heffron & Downs). As the world is drastically changing, geography skills allow students to better understand the trends around them. Therefore,

> the geographically informed person is prepared to meet the challenges of understanding what is happening in the world, why it is happening in a particular locale, how those things might change in the future, and how to make geographically informed and reasoned decisions. (Heffron & Downs, 2012, p. 7)

As our world is facing more global challenges, geographic knowledge and skills allows students to analyze current issues, using a variety of sources, to help develop solutions (Edelson et al., 2013).
Organization of Study

Organized into six chapters, this study is introduced in Chapter 1. A literature review is conducted in Chapter 2, including studies relevant to social studies education and assessment, professional development, teacher collaboration, educational change, and Professional Learning Communities – cornerstones of the conceptual framework. Methodology is provided in Chapter 3, providing the design of the research as well as methods of data collection and analysis. Participants in context are included in Chapter 4, and the findings of the study are presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 includes a discussion and conclusions reached as a result of this study as well as recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to recent trends, including the emphasis on state standardized testing, the subject of social studies has taken a back seat to reading and math (Baldi et al., 2015; Bisland, 2015; Lintner, 2006; Vogler et al., 2007; White et al., 2007; Zamosky, 2008). Pace (2012) found that even when social studies is incorporated into classrooms through reading, such as literary analysis or comprehension, students’ understanding of history was minimal. Furthermore, a survey of United States high school graduates indicates students have limited understanding of the world, including basic geographic knowledge (Bednarz et al., 2013). Russell (2009) identified two reasons: a focus on testing and that teachers also spend minimal time on the social studies instruction due to lack of content knowledge.

Geography and social studies skills are at the cornerstone of a successful democratic society (Neumann, 2017; White et al., 2007). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2016) believes “an excellent education in social studies is essential to civic competence and the maintenance and enhancement of a free and democratic society” (p. 180). In A Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education: Geography Education Research, the authors point out that “the amount of geography instruction that students receive, the preparation of their teachers to teach geography, and the quality of instructional materials are inadequate to prepare students for the demands of the modern world” (Bednarz et al., 2013, p. 7). This should be concerning, as our democratic society looks to social studies education to encourage political participation (Neumann, 2017).
Since states are not required to test social studies, priorities have shifted (Bisland, 2015; Russell, 2009). Instead of a focus on developing students’ knowledge about our society and the world, “the purpose of schooling is primarily for skill building, information acquisition, and job preparation, [and therefore] civic education has been replaced with job training” (White et al., 2007, p. 230). While this shift is noticeable at the state and national level, local schools are ultimately in charge of what they are teaching their students. They do not have to leave the subject out of the curriculum or place it on the back burner (Vogler et al., 2007). By understanding the importance of quality social studies curricular materials and lessons, teachers and districts can choose to not leave social studies behind.

By creating PLCs, schools have greatly improved teacher knowledge, instruction, and student interest in learning (DuFour, 2007b; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Graham, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Thompson & McElvy, 2007). Professional Learning Communities can become organizations within schools that are organized into collaborative grade and subject-level teams to develop common skills, knowledge, and assessments (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Teachers use team time to share teaching practices, interventions, and assess the attainment of the school’s common goals.

While the success of PLCs has been measured quantitatively (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010), the impact PLCs have on teacher instruction is largely unknown, particularly at the middle school level. By conducting teacher-observations within PLC teams and seeing how that translates into classroom teaching, a greater understanding can be reached regarding the impact PLCs have on teacher instruction.
This literature review first identifies the current status of social studies within schools and identifies best practices in social studies and geographic education, as well as the potential use of assessments. Additionally, varying methods of professional development are examined, identifying teacher collaboration as a possible solution for current problems. Next, the background and rationale behind learning communities is examined and a definition is established. Educational change is also explored, highlighting necessary considerations when implementing new programs. Finally, current studies on PLCs within schools are examined, highlighting the need for further research.

State of Social Studies

According to Jenness (1990) in *Making Sense of Social Studies*, social studies was first a subject starting in the 1900s. The purpose of this separate curricular area was to provide useful knowledge about the “conditioning realities of modern life, a sense of continuity and change in the world’s societies, and a level of civic awareness and commitment that will perpetuate the basis for democratic processes and participation” (pp. 14-15). While this definition continues to develop, in general it still holds true for today’s social studies classrooms. The entire public education system was called into question in the 1980s with *A Nation at Risk*, written by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell. He pointed out that schools were inadequate and deemed a failure, and he had a serious concern for the country’s economic efficiency and standard of living. Along with this, there was an emphasis on “deeper knowledge of foreign societies and cultures, and a familiarity with world history and with the language and literatures of other people” (Jenness, 1990, p. 11).
In 1985, the National Commissions on Social Studies in the Schools was organized, defining social studies by creating position and mission statements for the subject area. However, social studies took a hit in 2002 with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). According to Zamosky (2008), NCLB resulted in class time and funding cuts due to federal mandates. More specifically, “schools with high minority populations and low socio-economic status [were] suffering the most” (p. 48). This was dangerous because students were “ultimately unable to work together to solve public problems because they don’t have the knowledge to do it” (p. 49). Zamosky also cited a study completed by the Center on Education Policy, “which surveyed nearly 350 school districts across the nation [and] 44 percent of districts reported cutting time from one or more subjects or activities, including social studies” (p. 48). While cutting these subject areas should not be an option, the findings revealed that more emphasis needed to be made at a national level about the effects of leaving social studies out of the elementary classroom.

**Elementary Social Studies**

Because there is a connection between testing and leaving social studies out of the elementary classrooms, studies of social studies education at the elementary level also must be understood. Many studies have been completed at the elementary versus middle school level, and this research will be summarized here. When social studies was included as a state-tested subject, teachers still did not prioritize the content in the classroom (Bisland, 2015; Russell, 2009; Vogler et al., 2007). Vogler et al. (2007) conducted a mixed-method study of 235 elementary supervising teachers, determining the inclusion of testing resulted in more time spent on social
studies during the school day. Still teachers ranked their commitment to social studies low in comparison to other subject areas, with mathematics and reading easily taking the first and second places. One teacher reported, “I really don’t like social studies, but because it’s a PACT tested subject I have to teach it” (Vogler, para 28). These results were determined using self-reported data and interviews completed by pre-service teachers rather than researchers, and while interview protocols were strict, the research methodology could make larger generalizations difficult. Moreover, additional research indicated that when social studies is not tested at the elementary level, its role in the classroom is minimal because it is less valued and teachers lack content knowledge (Bisland, 2015; Russell, 2009). Lack of background knowledge and effort results in less engaging teaching methods (Darling-Hammond, 2006a). Furthermore, Shaughnessy & Haladyna (1985) found that because of teaching methods, repetition, and content, students reported that social studies was irrelevant and boring, rating it as one of their least favorite subjects.

Because social studies is not a priority, the quality of teaching in the subject area has greatly suffered (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001; Lintner, 2006). Lintner (2006) set out to examine how content was taught in social studies, choosing to survey and interview 111 elementary school administrators. The majority of administrators reported teachers were primarily relying on individual work and lectures for teaching grades three through five social studies. These results are dependent on the self-reporting of school administrators on teachers’ instruction and, therefore, could be biased based on perception alone. However, the results are consistent with other research indicating that educators heavily rely on rote teaching methods when teaching social studies (Moroz, 1995; Spries, Lee, & Turner, 2008). The lack of priority and low quality
of teaching in social studies at the elementary level has consequences beyond students’ fifth grade years.

**Middle School Social Studies**

The trend continues, as middle school students do not enjoy the subject of social studies and find little value in learning its content (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Hobbs & Moroz, 2001). Chiodo and Byford (2004) sought to capture students’ perceptions of social studies by interviewing a purposeful sample of 48 eighth and eleventh graders. Although a small sample, the eighth graders showed feelings of negativity and boredom toward the subject area, commenting on the lectures, traditional textbook work, and worksheets. A heavy reliance on the textbook was not considered best practice because these books were considered to be “unscholarly, political documents that attempt to inspire patriotism without encouraging students or teachers to ask questions about historical issues or to think critically about the information included between their covers” (Marker, 2006, p. 87). The boredom students feel in social studies is not the result of the subject matter, but rather a result of the teacher’s instruction according to Chiodo and Byford (2004).

Hobbs and Moroz (2001) also sought to understand student perceptions of social studies. They conducted a mixed-method investigation into teenage perceptions of social studies, in which students found social studies to be seemingly irrelevant and unrelated to their future mainly due to teaching practices that were teacher-centered. This study was small in scale (n=203) and relied on the self-reporting of students but does show consistency with other studies mentioned. Teaching methods centered on the textbook were found to be frequent and directly
resulting in student disenchantment with the subject area (Hobbs & Moroz; Lintner, 2006; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985).

Studies reporting consistently negative attitudes and perceptions toward social studies on the part of elementary and middle school students, teachers, and administrators show the powerful ways in which social studies is being left behind. To ensure students are prepared for a global 21st century, understand diverse cultures, and are citizens ready to engage in a participatory democracy, these perceptions must change.

Social Studies Education

Social studies is an all-encompassing subject in many ways. When hearing the words social studies, many associate that with history or geography. This subject area, however, includes many other facets, such as anthropology, law, sociology, philosophy, political science, archaeology, economics, psychology, natural sciences, humanities, religion, and even some mathematics (NCSS, 2016). According to Chapin and Messick (1999), social studies should teach students about human relations, skills for living in and understanding the world, and preparing them to become active citizens. The NCSS (2016) contends that the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for social studies curriculum will best prepare students to become citizens in a complex democracy, including “1) developing questions and planning inquiries; 2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; 3) evaluating sources and using evidence; 4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action” (p. 180). Because social studies is so diverse, the subject itself has gone through many transformations.
Because our representative democracy to is dependent on an educated and participatory citizen base, various systems of the world must be taught within the field of social studies. First and foremost, “students need to know their rights and their responsibilities as American citizens” (Chapin & Messick, 1999, p. 4). These include values such as “equality, freedom, the respect for people and property, but [students] must also be able to put those values into action through effective participation in the classroom, school, community, nation, and the world” (p. 4).

Usually these ideas are taught at the younger grade levels and reinforced throughout the educational years. Students should also reflect on experiences and values and become informed and participating citizens. Social studies educators should also make sure that the learning is meaningful for the students; relates to other subject areas, students’ lives, and outside world; encourages students to critically think about values and ethics; provides opportunities for students to challenge their thinking through perspectives; and allows students to participate actively (NCSS, 2016).

**Best Practices in Social Studies**

According to Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005), there are ten best practices of social studies every teacher should incorporate into his or her classroom. This includes looking at different types of sources and investigating topics in-depth, exercising democratic choices and responsibility for learning, exploring open-ended questions, and participating in the classroom and wider community. This civic participation component is also emphasized by the National Council for Social Studies (2016). The Council acknowledges that “students do not become responsible, participating citizens automatically” and suggest teachers integrate “ethical
dimensions of topics and address controversial issues while providing an area for reflective
development of concern for the common good and the application of democratic values” (p. 181). Also, the NCSS (1991) contends that it is important teachers are involving other disciplines
to include active participation, building on students’ prior knowledge, exploring a variety of
cultures and backgrounds, avoiding tracking to encourage knowledge, and reflecting on the
importance of thinking and preparation to be a lifelong learner. These best practices may raise
eyebrows, especially to those who are used to social studies being just about facts, including
basic memorization of people, dates, and locations, without regard to how these facts mesh with
the bigger picture of history or the social studies (Vogler & Virtue, 2007).

Hess (2013) developed the Hess Cognitive Rigor Matrix, in which she applied Webb’s
Depth-of-Knowledge Levels to Bloom’s Cognitive Process Dimensions. Within this matrix,
teachers are encouraged to utilize a variety of instructional strategies to better engage students,
taking them from recalling to extending their thinking and from remembering information to
creating and producing new products. Common themes include gathering multiple pieces of
evidence and critically analyzing sources along with critiquing historical interpretations and
sharing findings. Hess also notes that students should be critically thinking about maps, charts,
graphs, and diagrams. Once students are able to develop these spatial perception skills, students
can start solving problems within their daily lives related to adaptation to and the environment
(Gökçe, 2015). Neumann (2017) supports this idea of ending lecturing and put learning in the
hands of students through student-based inquiry, research, and critical thinking skills with the
goal of better preparing future generations for political participation.
Best Practices in Social Studies Assessments

Assessments provide a window into understanding what students are learning within the classroom. Because assessments can be geared to provide feedback to teachers and students regarding progress, “the results of student assessments can provide critical information for decision making in education policy and practice” (Edelson et al., 2013, p. 7). Based on how students perform on a variety of assessments, teachers can determine how well their students understand information as well as evaluate their methods of instruction. The NCSS (2016) suggests “Evaluation of data for planning curricular improvements should be used to ensure a challenging curriculum. This data should be collected through traditional and alternative assessments” (p. 182).

These varying assessments take two particular forms: formative and summative. Teachers should assign grades “primarily based upon the student’s demonstration of proficiency on the team’s common assessment of learning (summative assessments) after students have completed a series of formative assessments” (DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek, 2010, p. 95). When schools use assessments effectively, they “established proficiency standards students were expected to achieve for each of those skills. Students unable to demonstrate proficiency were required to keep working on the skill and complete certain requirements in order to be reassessed “(DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek, 2010, p. 95). By incorporating quality formative and summative assessments into the social studies classrooms, teachers can ensure students are actually grasping the varying skills necessary for critically thinking about the world around them.
Best Practices in Geography Education

Geography education also has a particularly unique set of best practices despite stereotypes that geography is simply map reading and memorizing locations. It should go beyond acquisition of information and include questioning, analyzing information, and communicating geographic patterns (Heffron & Downs, 2012). A Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education (2013) suggests that students should go beyond memorization and learn a “balanced view of geography that recognizes the importance of learning the place names...along with understanding powerful geographic concepts, and being able to reason geographically” (Bednarz et al., 2013, pp. 23-24).

Furthermore, when students are learning geography, they should complete the following practices: posing geographic questions, acquiring, organizing and analyzing that information with the goal of answering questions, and finally communicating their solutions and information (Bednarz et al.). Teachers should also “avoid teaching geography as simply a litany of locations—the ‘where’ constitutes the basic alphabet of geography, but sophisticated geographic thinking focuses on the ‘why there?’ and the complex connections between places” (Schell et al., 2013, p. 11). The National Geography Standards recommend that students should be “geographically informed through knowledge and mastery of three things: 1) factual knowledge; 2) mental maps and tools; 3) and ways of thinking” (Heffron & Downs, 2012, p. 7).

Best Practices in Geography Assessments

Because geography education has a special skill-set, the quality of geography assessments should be further analyzed to ensure students are grasping global knowledge,
critically analyzing maps, and varying their ways of thinking. Based on recent geography assessments nationally, Bednarz et al. (2013) observed the following startling results:

More than 30% of high school students are so far behind [in geography skills] that it is unlikely they will ever reach proficiency. To compare with textual literacy, this level of geographic illiteracy is analogous to having 70% of high school graduates unable to read a newspaper editorial and identify the assumptions, evidence, and causal connections in its argument (p. 15-16).

Furthermore, as these tests are further analyzed in relation to geography knowledge and skill, it is revealed that “both assessment frameworks and actual assessments do not reflect the balance between assessing what students know and their ability to apply their knowledge that is required to evaluate the development of 21st century geography competencies” (Edelson et al., 2013, p. 9). When geography assessments are improved, they can help educators better understand where deficiencies lie and target instruction to better meet the needs of their students.

In Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education Project: Assessment, the authors note they would like to see assessments in geography education move “toward a balance between developing geographic knowledge and learning to engage in geographic practices” (Edleson et al., 2013, p. 7). While the potential of assessments is often overlooked, Edelson et al. (2013) maintain that “assessments can serve four main purposes: to assist teaching and learning, to measure individual achievement, to evaluate programs, and to conduct research” (p. 32). Assessments need to also reflect content goals, varied characteristics, and should be cost effective (Edleson et al., 2013).

However, order to create these effective instruments of assessment, teachers must understand geographic skills and content:
We need professionals with the necessary geography expertise and assessment development training and experience to develop effective assessment frameworks, items, and instruments for geography. We need educators who have been trained in the best practices for incorporating assessments and their results to inform teaching and learning in the classroom. (Edleson et al., 2013, p. 66)

This expectation is currently incredibly challenging at the middle school level when so many teachers with a lack of expertise are being asked to create a variety of geography assessments. However, districts could utilize assessment frameworks and include them as part of their curricular areas of focus, as currently “fewer than 60% of geography curriculum units included assessments” (Edleson et al., 2013, p. 28). An assessment frameworks available from Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education Project: Assessment, known as AFGS21, is organized around the two dimensions: “One dimension, often called the content dimension, describes the concepts and principles from the content domain to be covered by assessments. The other, often called the cognitive dimension, organizes behaviors (i.e., what students should be able to do)” (Edleson et al., 2013, p. 34). This framework allows educators to create a geography assessment after they specify content and cognition goals, identify performance expectations, and specify varying characteristics of the assessments (Edleson et al.). The development of quality assessments has the potential to positively impact student understanding of geographic concepts and global competency.

Professional Development

Professional development is one way teachers can learn new and relevant teaching strategies to engage students of all types. However, teachers are often subjected to professional development that has little meaning or represents a fad or trend within education, and therefore,
new techniques do not transmit into the classroom (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Knowles, 1973). These one-shot workshops may inspire teachers to try something temporarily, but the lack of focus and consistency does little to actually improve teaching (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Additionally, while educational theory can help teachers propose solutions to a variety of problems and critically reflect on best practices in the classrooms, theory is often absent from the profession after mandated university coursework (Darling-Hammond, 2006a; Higgs, 2013).

Ideally, professional development within schools should be centered on the collaborative environment that allows for the training model of theory, demonstration, and practice (McCall, 2006; Showers, 1990). Additionally, subject matter and teaching strategies should be intertwined in continuous training (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Medina, Pollard, Schneider, & Leonhardt, 2000). Teachers transfer more ideas to their classroom when top down mandates vanish and are replaced with peer support, including observations, brainstorming, collaboration, and connection to student work (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Joyce & Showers, 2002). While this form of effective training creates initial discomfort, like feelings of awkwardness, and requires greater effort, teachers exhibit greater horizontal transfer in which they are able to directly apply what they were learning to their classroom situation (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

Standards for Professional Development

To reform professional development into communities of collaborative learners, current mandates cannot be left out. Within the last ten years the ideas of collaborative learning communities have reverberated throughout national and state standards (Hord, 2008). Standards now affirm that collaborative settings are necessary for creating the most successful environment
for students. The context standards of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001) coincide with this plan. The first one states professional development should “organize adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school district” and should provide “resources to support adult learning and collaboration.” Furthermore, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) cites that “teachers work with their colleagues as members of a team, sharing their knowledge and skills while contributing to the ongoing development of strong schools.” (p. 36). The Illinois Professional Teaching Standards also encourage collaborative relationships in that a competent teacher “initiates collaboration with others to create opportunities that enhance student learning” and “participates in professional development, professional organizations, and learning communities, and engages in peer coaching and mentoring activities to enhance personal growth and development” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013, pp. 7-8). Encouraging professional development structured around social and collaborative learning is one that now coincides with state and national standards.

**Social Studies Professional Development**

Social studies teachers should be provided with professional development activities that are content-specific and incorporate teaching strategies. Furthermore, Davis & Krajcik (2005) note that “teacher learning involves developing and integrating one’s knowledge base about content, teaching, and learning; becoming able to apply that knowledge in real time to make instructional decisions; participating in the discourse of teaching; and becoming enculturated into (and engaging in) a range of teacher practices” (p. 3). Additionally, teachers must understand
how facts are tied together through critical reading of primary and secondary accounts and establish a new construct of historical information (Ragland, 2008). Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) concluded that after providing quality resources and professional development, teachers showed excitement about the subject and used the materials in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers’ attitudes toward history need to change through engagement and excitement in quality professional development activities (Ragland, 2007a). Bednarz et al. (2013) identified that more experience, greater levels of content knowledge, and engaging in professional development improved student learning. Despite this knowledge, “we need research about effective ways to implement change in the educational system. This includes a broad understanding of teacher preparation, professional development, and strategies for effective implementation of educational innovation” (p. 58). Historians and university professors can play an influential part in professional development by supporting educators and teaching them how to engage in critically thinking about historical events (Grenier, 2010; McCall, 2006).

In 2001, a large boost for social studies professional development came in the form of the Teaching American History (TAH) project created by the Department of Education. This program has provided over $450 million in grants for quality research-based teaching in American history through university, museum, and school partnerships (Hall & Scott, 2007; Humphrey, Chang-Ross, Donnelly, Hersh, & Skolnik, 2005; Ragland, 2007b). Research on TAH projects has shown positive impacts on teacher classroom instruction, but many projects serve already experienced and certified history teachers (Humphrey et al., 2005). Additionally, the “use of traditional training formats hampered most projects’ ability to offer other characteristics of research-based high-quality professional development” (p. xiii). Those projects
that reported positive changes in teacher use connected social studies subject knowledge with instructional strategies specifically geared around history.

**Geography Education Professional Development**

Social studies classrooms around the country are not always being taught by teachers with extensive knowledge of the subject; in reality, many social studies teachers have don’t have appropriate certification yet are still expected to deliver a challenging curriculum (Baldi, Warner-Griffin, & Tadler, 2015). The subject of geography presents a particular challenge because the world is constantly changing and teachers’ knowledge must develop over time (Schell et al., 2013). Furthermore,

To teach geography well, teachers must have a deep knowledge of the discipline, and how to teach it, in order to improve student learning of the big ideas and practices of geography. However, many teachers of geography do not enter the profession with rich understandings of geography concepts and how to teach them. (Schell et al., 2013, p. 9)

Because of the particularly daunting content and background knowledge involved with the teaching of geography, Davis & Krajcik (2005) suggest combining professional development with curricular materials that provide background knowledge. More specifically, “Educative curriculum materials [which] help to increase teachers’ knowledge in specific instances of instructional decision making but also help them develop more general knowledge that they can apply flexibly in new situations” (Davis & Krajcik, 2005, p. 3). This also fits with recommendations found in *A road map for 21st century geography education: Instructional materials and professional development*, in which researchers suggest schools
Develop and implement professional development programs that enrich teachers’ knowledge of contemporary geography and how to teach it [and]...Design and implement coherent and sustained professional development programs with clear and measurable goals. (Schell et al., 2013, p. 9)

While one-day workshops can advance a teachers' knowledge, professional development should be continual and connect clearly to learning objectives within the classroom. For example, McClurg & Buss (2007) found that “sustained quality professional development experience [allowed teachers] to gain the knowledge and skill necessary to use GIS [Geographic Information Systems] and GPS [Global Positioning Systems] units to enhance their students’ attainment of targeted learning objectives” (p. 85). Professional development sessions that incorporate such geographic technology have the potential to improve teacher’s attitudes toward such digital tools and their value in the classroom (McClurg & Buss, 2007).

During sessions of professional development, geography teachers should figure out how to encourage students to be

actively engaged in generating questions, exploring solutions, and making decisions about personal, local, national, and global issues [where] students are effectively using geospatial technologies— in and out of the classroom— in meaningful ways to access, evaluate, analyze, produce, and share information. (Schell et al., 2013, p. 7)

While this sounds ideal, the reality of geography professional development needs to further assessed, as “Currently, American students are not even provided opportunities to learn enough geography to understand the very basic aspects of the world in which they live” (Schell et al., 2013, p. 7). However, with a specific focus on geography professional development, educators can better prepare students for an increasingly globalized world.
Subject Knowledge

When teachers are not familiar with social studies content knowledge, a minimal amount of time is spent on social studies (Russell, 2009). The heavy reliance on textbook and lectures, as seen in many social studies classrooms, is an indication that teachers are not prepared to deliver or translate the content in the social studies curriculum (Bolinger & Warren, 2007). Even when teachers try to incorporate social studies topics in their classrooms through a subject more comfortable to them, such as reading or literature, the subject matter of social studies is undermined (Pace, 2012). When professional development activities focus solely on this transfer of knowledge, few ideas are actually transferred into classroom practice because teachers “needed to know how to deliver the material as well as how to better engage their students in classroom activities” (Diem, Field, & Hernandez, 2003, p. 6). Content cannot be taught without application and the inclusion of higher order thinking skills because it does not adequately develop teachers’ ideas, values, and perspectives (Bolinger & Warren, 2007).

However, when subject matter is left out, teachers incorporate few changes into their classrooms. Medina et al. (2000) conducted a three-year study of teachers who completed summer professional development training in which they learned about history through writing, questioning, examining sources, developing interpretations, and sharing with colleagues. Based on teacher and student reflections, Medina et al. (2000) concluded that more subject specific professional development was essential due to the piecemeal integration of taught ideas. Warren (2007) observed in his experience with TAH projects that teachers were not able to see the value of using new approaches. Instead they picked through lessons to integrate some new ideas into their teaching, skipping over the authentic inquiry. Teachers seemed to be worried about
covering their curriculum; they were looking for simple and quick lessons rather than an entire new way to approach history. Content mixed with instructional knowledge provides more beneficial experiences for teachers.

**Instructional Knowledge**

To make professional development more meaningful for history teachers, Ragland (2007a, 2008) developed a set of 12 authentic history teaching strategies, known as the McRAH (A Model Collaboration: Rethinking American History) strategies. They include using primary documents, analyzing artifacts, interpreting historical documents, researching arguments, instructing thematically, questioning concepts, applying graphic organizers, integrating technology, utilizing the counterfactual method, integrating the narrative approach, including perspective-taking activities, and encouraging the formation of personal connections. These twelve strategies coincide with other social studies professional development research, particularly regarding the use of primary documents and the importance of viewing history from many perspectives (Bolinger & Warren, 2007). However, when these 12 strategies were introduced all at once, teachers felt overwhelmed and picked and chose which ones to implement based on which ones were focused on most (Ragland, 2007a). Ragland (2008) found that once taught, pre-service teachers were more confident in the strategy; however, in many cases confidence levels decreased after trying out these methods in the classroom. Therefore, “continued practice and refining of the strategy is necessary” (p. 14). To increase confidence levels, best practices needed to be taught and modeled through collaboration with historians as well as applied and reflected on through feedback.
Furthermore, when students are engaged in interacting with their learning versus passively being told material through lectures, learning gains tripled (Mazur, 2009). Integrating technology can also prove to result in greater knowledge retention for history students, but there is little lasting impact on classroom practices if the teacher does not fully understand how to utilize technology (Heafner & Friedman, 2008; Wellman, 2002). Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) found that continued, sustained, and quality professional development for social studies teachers that includes development of skills and strategies produced positive changes in classroom instruction and student learning.

**Outside Partnerships**

School and university partnerships along with historical societies and museums can provide enhanced professional development, but only if the organizations agree on fundamental goals and teachers are attentive to such changes (McCall, 2006). Grenier (2010) conducted a study of five-day museum summer institutes and gauged how that learning transferred into the attendees’ classroom. Through interviews, the teachers expressed positive experiences with the institute, noting they learned how to approach history from various viewpoints and perspectives, including local connections, and frequently thinking back to role play or discussions that took place within those five days (Grenier). While the theories and methods within this study promoted transferability into the classroom, all of the teachers signed up for this class due to personal or professional interest and motivation. Therefore, they may have been more likely to implement new ideas within the classroom than a more typical social studies teacher.
Facilitated by historians, one TAH project encouraged teachers to think like historians through the use of inquiry and interpretation of many perspectives of an event, bringing primary source documents to life through discussions (Hall & Scott, 2007). During this two-week summer institute, teachers had to create a lesson incorporating similar primary source materials that engaged students in historical thinking. While some showed teachers were using higher order thinking, many lessons still reflected a low level of historical understanding, showing a level of comprehension not sufficient for students to really think. Similar results were reported after teachers engaged in a summer institute training on a “culture of evidence” to frame historical problems (Mucher, 2007, p. 265). Approximately one quarter of the social studies teachers at the high school level embraced this methodology, while the rest dismissed the professional development as hype. Partnerships with outside organizations can provide additional background knowledge for teachers (Grenier, 2010; McCall, 2006). However, workshops should steer away from a focus solely on content knowledge, as teachers “needed to know how to deliver the material as well as how to better engage their students in classroom activities” (Diem, Field, & Hernandez, 2003, p. 6).

Some professional development activities for social studies have sought to modify teacher practices by changing their attitudes about teaching history (Ragland, 2007b). Ragland conducted a study in which teachers worked directly with historians to understand how they come to historical conclusions, processed this information, and went through lessons as students to better understand how to teach history. After a series of workshops and ongoing support throughout the year and with continued reinforcement, teachers’ attitudes were more positive about history and they were more likely to change their practices.
By using resources outside of the school district, including museums, historians, and university partnerships, teachers can engage in positive professional development experiences that change their teaching habits and improve student learning (Grenier, 2010; Hall & Scott, 2007; Humphrey et al., 2005; Medina et al., 2000). However, because many of these professional development opportunities took place during the summer, teachers who attended had particular motivation to actually sign up for these classes. Greatly impacting professional development in social studies is whether teachers take advantage of different offerings by educational and historical organizations and institutions (McCall, 2006).

Within the realm of social studies professional development, research is lacking when it comes to how to best provide consistent support to all teachers. In some instances, teachers are required to spend large amounts of time outside of the school day or during the summer to engage in training, as shown by research, with few consistent results or positive impacts in the classroom (Hall & Scott, 2007; Mucher, 2007). Furthermore, teachers who do not have a background in or love for the subject also may not choose to participate in such beneficial experiences. Many of these professional development experiences have also been funded by a national grant, and those programs are costly to duplicate. Therefore, research needs to be completed on how to support all teachers of social studies in a way that is not as costly or does not require large amounts of time outside of the school day to complete. Professional development for social studies must be pragmatic, but it should also intertwine subject matter with instructional strategies to have the greatest impact in the classroom.
Using Collaboration to Improve Teaching

Collaboration does not need to be limited to historical, museum, and university partnerships. It can also take place within school buildings and have a positive impact on teacher learning (DuFour, 2004). Teachers who are working in isolation often find it difficult to meet the needs of their students due to goals imposed on them by others. Therefore, secluded teachers have greater issues with qualities that lead to consistent improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). A departure from old norms, in-service training, and teacher-centered classrooms is essential. The new professional development should include capacity-building focused on teachers’ learning in a collaborative environment (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

PLC is a theory of increasing student learning based on teacher collaboration. The implementation of PLCs has greatly risen in popularity because of improved student test scores (Dallas, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Graham, 2007). However, these quantitative data are not necessarily effective in determining if teachers have changed their practice. When PLCs are too focused on assessments and data, especially when teachers do not have the common content or background knowledge, PLCs have the potential to fail (Sims & Penny, 2014). Therefore, an understanding must be reached regarding the theories and ideas that have impacted the prominence of PLCs within education, ultimately developing a working definition of PLCs that could be used to structure qualitative research.

To understand how PLCs have developed, it is essential to look to Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social learning and Bandura’s (2001) ideas of self-efficacy. These ideas, combined with Knowles’s (1973) adult learning theory and Senge’s (1990) formulation of learning
organizations, have provided the foundation for modern-day restructuring within schools. Professional development goals now need to be situated around these theories and combined with more recent studies on characteristics of effective teacher training to develop schools that meet the needs of all students (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

**Socially Constructed Learning**

Because of the varying levels of experience present within a school or district, Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of socially constructed learning should be kept in mind when planning professional development, as it encourages interaction and collaboration among people with varying strengths and weaknesses. Similar to the collaboration encouraged within Professional Learning Communities, constructivists believe that by socially interacting with varying levels of learning, all learners benefit (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). Vygotsky (1978) notes that each person can get into his/her Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or his/her highest potential of learning, if more capable students interact with those less knowledgeable or experienced. All learners can develop new understanding because those with less knowledge gain new ways of understanding, while “more experienced students [can] discover missing information, gain new insights through interactions, and develop a qualitatively different way of understanding” (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997, p. 507). Social learning also has the ability to increase a person’s self-confidence regarding particular tasks. This collaborative, social learning is promoted in Professional Learning Communities through an ongoing dialogue among teachers.

Bandura (2001) found that self-efficacy, or the belief in capability, greatly affects competency. He notes that “unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall
detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 10). Self-efficacy has been found to be greatly increased by social learning, and when group members work together to accomplish a task, efficacy rises. Through the process of social interaction, group motivation increases, effort intensifies, retention improves, and morale is reinforced (Bandura). When working in a collective group that has set out to achieve a common goal, change is also more readily accepted (Bandura). PLCs provide time for teachers to develop a collaborative practice, in which “a group of individuals...share a goal and work together to achieve that goal, assess their progress, make corrections, and hold themselves accountable for achieving their common goal” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010, p. 35). Therefore, PLCs have the potential to increase teacher efficacy, motivation, and the overall morale of the school. To make learning meaningful for teachers as individuals, adult learning theories and learning communities must also be considered.

**Adult Learners**

Knowles (1973) encourages school leaders and teachers to understand the ideas of andragogy and change professional development accordingly. One major component to this theory is the idea that in organizations structured by hierarchy, individuals have less motivation for self-improvement. This is in contrast to working groups who find fewer impediments and more personal motivation (Knowles). Schools should create climates in which interlinked communities are created and in which every teacher engages in self-directed learning. This way schools can greatly improve through their own teachers’ strengths and unique talents rather than relying on an outside source to provide mandates or guidance. If schools provide structured
discourse and professional development opportunities that are self-directed, teachers can increase their professional capabilities with the goal of developing into an educator who is reflective and engaged (Knowles).

Furthermore, learning communities acknowledge the needs of the social and adult learner. Discerning among those who are committed and those who are enrolled, Senge (1990) believes “shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning” (p. 206). Criticizing top-down management, Senge encourages an organization that is continuously learning and made up of people who are adaptable. To institute this learning, groups also must develop systems thinking or figure out how they got to this point. Through collaboration and a common commitment, Senge brought learning organizations to the forefront in education. PLCs build on Senge’s ideas by promoting team-developed common goals in which teachers lead, participate in, and adjust their work according to the team’s priorities.

Brandt (1998) affirms the ideas of Senge (1990), noting great differences regarding learning individuals versus learning organizations within the realm of education. Individuals focus on what they find personally meaningful by constructing knowledge based on what is old. At times, they will try to merge new and old ideas, not fully integrating or understanding the new ideas because of the lack of dialogue and reflection (Cohen, 1990). On the other hand, organizations use data to improve, set common goals, share information, reflect, provide feedback, create new ideas, and share appropriate adaptive behaviors (Brandt). PLCs seemingly provide the structure and opportunity for adult and social learning as encouraged by Knowles (1973), Brandt (1998), and Senge (1990).
Professional Learning Communities

While there are more general versions of learning communities, Hord (2008) and DuFour et al. (2010) use the term Professional Learning Community to refer to a specific school or district framework. Instead of just encouraging professional development, PLCs are based on an entire organizational restructuring. The exact structure within these frameworks guides school districts in implementation of school reform, incorporating social and adult learning theories, learning communities, and professional development. This idea of community building and systems thinking is not new (Darling-Hammond, 2006b). However, the factors that make up PLCs have particular commonalities. Multiple resources are used within definitions of the same theorists, as their definitions have evolved over time. Hord (1997) defines PLCs as “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (p. 10). She identifies five components, including 1) shared beliefs, 2) shared leadership, 3) supportive conditions, 4) collective learning, and 5) shared practice (Hord, 2008). More generally, DuFour (2004) defines PLCs as “a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling” (p. 10). Each person within the school belongs to one or more teams, with the purpose of brainstorming, collaborating, and reflecting with colleagues to move from a focus on teaching to one on learning. Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour’s (2002) three themes include the development of a solid foundation, the creation of collaborative teams, and a focus on results. To structure this discussion of what makes a PLC, the researcher used DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2010) definition.

The main difference between Hord’s (1997) definition and DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek’s (2010) is the acknowledgement that assessment should play an influential role in
learning and teaching (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004). Within the ideal PLC, same subject and grade-level teachers collaborate to develop common forms of assessment for each unit. They then administer this assessment to all students, using the results of the assessment to further guide instruction for the teachers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). Additionally, these assessment results should play a role in classroom instruction, not only because of nationalized testing, but also because a large body of research highlights great gains in student achievement when instruction focuses on results (Fullan, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Stiggins, 2002).

However, Fullan (2007) reminds leaders that teachers need time to process data and cautions against the “DRIP syndrome- Data Rich/Information Poor” in which schools may have data, but they do not do anything with them (p. 9). Teachers should be providing intervention time for students once teachers identify those who do not meet or exceeded various targets (DuFour et. al, 2010). Simms and Penny (2014) found that when a school was too focused on data without time, collaboration, or support, the PLC was not effective. Additionally, Wilson (2016) found that while time was given for PLC meetings, “89% described their PLC experience as inundated with [administration determined] meetings,” resulting in “limited time and added responsibility” (pp. 54-55).

Studies of PLCs within schools use DuFour’s (2004) findings to ground their theory (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Graham, 2007), while notable change theorist Fullan (2006) even states “The DuFours et al. (2006) represent the most advanced example of the PLC framework” (p. 6). Fullan (2006), however, does caution that PLCs have turned into an innovative trend, and when schools do not actually use the methodology behind Professional Learning Communities,
they can be less effective. When schools develop a solid foundation, create collaborative teams, and focus on results, a significant improvement in student learning can occur (Fullan).

**Solid Foundation for PLCs**

Discovering the purpose, understanding the function, developing goals are primary decisions PLCs must agree upon before they can become effective (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Each member of the learning community should be able to articulate these shared visions and missions for the group. While they should begin their development with these goals, it is imperative they are willing to modify and adjust them as needed. Fullan (2006) believes that while groups must start out on a common ground, “shared vision and ownership is more an outcome of a quality than a process that is a precondition. This is important to know because it causes one to act differently in order to create ownership” (p. 10).

This common purpose under which a PLC functions is not decided by the administration; however, Senge (1990) notes that if the vision is created solely by the leader, it will fail. Instead these decisions should be up to the collaborative group made up of all facets of the community. Hord (2008) agrees, noting it should be up to staff members to set goals, figure out what they need, and reflect on their implementation. In fact, when PLC implementation is solely up to the administrator and staff are given no input, teachers become resentful and the change is not successful (Pancucci, 2008; Patterson, 2006). Once PLCs are able to identify their purpose, capacity building, or increasing the group’s ability, can begin. This includes modifying the main infrastructure of the school, including policies, resources, training, ideas, and actions that are put in place to help the overall goal, which is to be decided by the group (Fullan, 2005a). All of
these processes begin the building of and ultimately increase the group’s efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

This foundational change also should have a direct focus on student learning (DuFour, 2004). It requires commitment and buy-in from teachers, and therefore, when implementing PLCs, teachers should understand the purposes and theory behind its implementation. Teachers have a moral commitment to help students reach success, but they do not often know exactly how to create the best learning environment on their own (Fullan, 2006). This is where collaborative teams come into the implementation of PLCs.

Collaborative Teams

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) completed research on effective high schools, noting those that met the needs of diverse learners engaged in active professional discourse, which gave them added tools to transform their teaching. Being able to share ideas fluidly within a group of professionals is not something that will happen immediately. However, with the discussion comes an increased sense of community that overall improves teachers’ and students’ learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Furthermore, Cohen (1990) identified that when teachers are provided with multiple perspectives and asked questions about their practices, they have the greater ability to change versus those who work in isolation. If teachers shared issues, brainstormed results, and reflected to create their best lesson, the impact this shared dialogue could have on student experiences in the school would be immense.

Ideally, this will create the kind of climate described by Fullan (2006) as one that calls for “deep engagement with other colleagues and with mentors in exploring, refining, and
improving their practice as well as setting up an environment in which this not only can happen but is encouraged, rewarded, and pressed to happen” (p. 57). Teachers should be learning new ideas from their peers because of their collective commitment to improving student learning. MeGee (2016) found that when teachers engage in collaborative activities and discussions surrounding curriculum and student work, changes in teaching practices were observed. Little (2003) also observed that teachers in PLCs were innovative, supportive, and oriented toward student success, but some teachers also reported feeling constrained in their creativity if their ideas did not coincide with those of the group. Referring back to Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social learning, all teachers should benefit from this sharing. However, reaching consensus regarding the way in which construction is delivered will require great amounts of compromise. Additionally, teachers may have to abandon their old ways of teaching for more up-to-date engaging activities, causing internal conflict within the teachers (Cohen, 1990).

Beyond discussion, other components to collaborative communities include work inside the classroom. Hord (2008) specifies that observation is another component of PLCs in which staff members visit each other’s rooms with the goal of supporting and learning from each other. All the while, the end goal is to achieve “high quality student learning” (p. 13). Furthermore, Joyce and Showers (2002) contend teachers should serve as coaches with the goal of helping others’ acquisition of skills. Coaching provides companionship, technical feedback, analysis of application, and adaptation to students (Joyce & Showers). Darling-Hammond (2006b) continues beyond coaching, also recommending team planning, team teaching, and group research to understand collaboratively what works in the classroom.
Collaborative communities do not just refer to the work within each individual PLC, but the idea of mutually respectful relationships should also be shared by the leadership (Varlas, 2010). Hord (1997) notes that PLCs will result in “the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership—and thus, power and authority—through inviting staff input in decision making” (p. 27). These administrators should also be engaged in critical discourse with teacher-leaders and other administrators with the formation of their own PLC (DuFour, 1991). These PLCs can be within the school or district, but the point is principals are setting a model for other teachers to follow.

When school leaders take an active part in PLCs, teachers’ opinions of administration greatly improve (Phillips, 2003). Administrators have the responsibility to keep the staff up-to-date on the latest research, serve as a mentor, organize meaningful learning experiences, gather evidence of successful teaching, and recognize staff members for their accomplishments (DuFour, 1991). In one such instance, Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, and Towner (2004) found that when they were in a principal-led study group, teachers’ attitudes toward students improved, instructional strategies were shared, new approaches were brainstormed, and appreciation for the leadership was expressed.

Providing time for collaboration is also a major responsibility of the administration. Time can be managed in a variety of creative ways, including a restructuring of the schedule, but is essential in ensuring teachers have time within the confines of the school day to collaborate (Phillips, 2003). On that same note, McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) caution administrators from bringing in too many initiatives; instead, they should “keep everyone focused on developing
PLCs and collaborative responsibilities so as not to bring a whole bunch of other reform and focus on PLCs and ‘pull teachers’ time away from work together” (p. 41).

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) believe these professional communities could not only thrive within individual organizations but could also extend to the greater community when organized around significant issues. Ball and Cohen (1999) agree, noting that linking should not stop within a school building but instead should involve larger circles, including “subject matter organizations, study groups, university-school partnerships, or other groups or networks” (p. 18). Hord (1997) acknowledged that by having support beyond the walls of the school, teachers feel reaffirmed in their work and are increasingly committed to change. The implications for the possibilities are associated with a shared vision for student success and a school built on collaborative groups, but these two factors are not enough. Assessment of all types must also play a role in PLCs.

Focus on Assessments

To develop an understanding of exactly what the driving force should be in teacher instruction, various types of assessments of and for learning should be used (Stiggins, 2002). These checks for comprehension allow teachers to understand what their students are mastering and can, therefore, reflect on changes that need to be made. Teachers are often overloaded with assessments, suffering from what Fullan (2007) refers to as the “DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor” (p. 9). Schools may have data, but they do not do anything with it.

The collaboration component of PLCs integrates with the ideas of assessment to actually make results useful in tailoring instruction. For example, “team members identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning … [gaining] new insights into what is working and what is not”
(Fullan, 2007, p. 9). The insights that teachers develop are a result of engaging in structured collaborative discussion after viewing results. This piece of conversation and reflection after an assessment is essential for teachers to fully reflect on and ultimately change their practice.

After reflections take place at an individual and group level, teachers must be willing to try new ideas in their classrooms. Fortunately, change is greatly motivated by evidence and test scores (Fullan, 2006). When teachers see proof of what can be accomplished, the ability for the PLC to succeed can greatly increase; a results-oriented team who compares data motivates teachers to change (Fullan, 2006). When teachers are trying new ideas after periods of collaboration, they should start seeing changes in their students’ learning, further increasing motivation (Guskey, 2000). Teachers need proof, plain and simple, whether they are trying out new methods, different curricula, or modifying activities they have done in the past.

Supporting the framework of DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2010), PLCs have the potential to result in positive changes if they have a common foundation, develop collaborative communities, and focus on results to guide instruction. Agreeing with these precepts, Fullan (2007) suggests teachers “need access to other colleagues to learn from them. The teaching profession must become a better learning profession” (p. 296).

Educational Change

Fullan (2006) sought to develop “theories of action” as opposed to “theory in use” with the goals of making action explicit and getting results (p. 3). However, he first identified those theories of use, noting how many trends gained in reputation but often failed in terms of putting ideas into action. He suggested that schools that rely on theories of standards are not successful
due to their lack of integration into classroom practice. Next, he chided Professional Learning Communities for being superficial in many circumstances, for people treating it as an innovation, and for mistakenly changing individual schools instead of districts. His points are relevant and coincide with research regarding PLCs that do seem to fail, but by acknowledging the weaknesses of PLCs, Fullan defends their use if integrated as designed. Finally, Fullan disagreed with the use of incentives or qualifications to attract people to leadership or teaching positions, contending these types of programs promote the individual but do not encourage them to truly understand the culture of schools.

Fullan (2006) then built his change plan based on theories of action with merit, suggesting change can occur after “seven core premises” are understood, including motivation, capacity building, contextual learning, changing contexts, reflexive bias, tri-level engagement, and persistence (p. 8). These core principles allow school leaders and teachers to understand what to expect in the face of change, while giving structure and guidance to the plans.

Guskey’s (2002) model of teacher change specifically relates to the relationship between professional development and change. When teachers experience a professional development experience, there is an observable change in teachers’ practice within the classroom, but that change is lasting only when teachers see proof of change through student learning. Within his plan, Guskey (2002) identifies three principles regarding change and professional development: “recognize that change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers…ensure that teachers receive regular feedback on student learning progress…[and] provide continued follow-up, support and pressure” (p. 386-388). Teacher change must be understood for a school or district-
wide program, such as a PLC, to be effectively implemented. Otherwise, regardless of the knowledge or ability, teachers may not have buy-in to this particular method of collaboration.

**Motivation and Capacity Building**

Finding ways to motivate others to change is the core precept that falls under Fullan’s (2007) plan. Motivation can be influenced by morality, ability, available resources, support, and personal identity. Motivation includes a commitment to all students, especially those who might have additional obstacles or needs. Once teachers experience learning in their students, “positive experience is what is motivating” (p. 59).

Capacity building is increasing the ability of the group with an effort to close gaps in student learning (Fullan, 2007). This includes modifying the main infrastructure of the school through policies, resources, training, ideas, and actions put in place to help the overall goal, which is to be decided by the group (Fullan, 2005a). The rebuilding process must take place as a collective group, encouraging people to work together in ways previously unfamiliar. Positive pressure in which teachers are supported with appropriate resources, knowledge, and motivation is a great motivator (Fullan, 2006). A major mistake of many schools under the era of reform is the extreme focus on native pressure or pressure that does not motivate and usually results in a rejection of the change.

**Learning and Changing Context**

Next, teachers must learn within individual contexts. This will create the kind of climate described by Fullan (2006) as one that calls for high levels of engagement, including an
encouraging environment focused on learning about, improving, and refining teaching practice. Teachers should be learning new ideas from their peers because of their collective commitment to improving student learning. Learning contexts coincide with the ideal grade-level PLC meeting, in which teachers could be engaged in discussions regarding the enhancement of teaching practices (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010).

The larger group must have the ability to change if change is to take place. Therefore, it is not just individual schools that should be making gains and experiencing growth, but districts should be establishing what Fullan (2006) calls “lateral capacity building” (p. 10). This is where school districts share their best ideas and people start identifying with a larger movement beyond their classroom or school.

To see if change is actually taking place, observers must consider individual concerns, levels of use, and variance of new to old practices (Guskey, 2000). These Stages of Concern include a rating scale from zero to six, including awareness (0), informational (1), personal (2), management (3), consequence (4), collaboration (5), and refocusing (6). Levels of Use has a rating scale similar to the ideas of concern, rating teachers one through six ranging from non-use to renewal, respectively. Stages one through three are levels of non-use, while four through six indicate the critical indicators are in use. To determine if practices are different from before, researchers should ask participants about specific changes in practice and collect evidence both before and after the professional development.
Reflective Action and Engagement

Teachers must have the opportunity to engage with their learning, reflecting on what is or is not working and applying it to their own particular setting. Fullan (2006) identified issues when engaging in this reflection, in that it should result in teacher ownership of a common goal, not one that has been decided by someone else. The larger and more elaborate the planning document, the less quality actions result. This planning cannot be considered action. Teachers should then be able to explore their understanding of that knowledge and evaluate whether they have been successful. This can include the process of unlearning the old theories they thought were solid and replace them with new concepts and ideas:

Those who had a good deal of help in cultivating such judgment—that it, who were part of some active conversation about their work, in which a variety of questions about their practice were asked and answered, from a variety of perspectives—would have more resources for change than those who had been left alone to figure things out for themselves. (Cohen, 1990, p. 326)

Teachers must reflect on what they are doing step by step, engaging in a reflective process, inquiring, looking for evidence, and then repeating this cyclical process (Fullan, 2006). Change must be connected through schools/community, district, and state effort, or “pursuing strategies that promote mutual interaction and influence within and across the three levels” (p. 11). Cohen (1990) notes that teachers are naturally resistant to change because they have “entrenched classroom habits”, and “many innovations fail because they are poorly adapted to classrooms” (p. 312). Thus, decisions in PLCs should be made by the individual groups of teachers while keeping in mind district and state goals, and time should be given to allow for change and reflection to occur.
Persistence

Tough times are inevitable: “It takes what I would call resilience—persistence plus flexibility” (Fullan, 2006, p. 11). Leaders have to be willing to acknowledge change will not be easy and is something that has to be worked on over time. Change guarantees conflict in some form. However, Fullan (2005b) advises that individuals should actually take time to listen to arguments due to the new perspectives gained. Any small movement forward is seen as progress because it takes great work to move the entire system. Fullan specifies that small innovation should take from two to three years, while system overhauls might require up to ten years. If it change happens quickly without conflict, he warns that “smooth implementation is often a sign that not much is really changing” (p. 6). Persistence, therefore, might be evident in PLCs where administrators have acknowledged that change is a slow process and teachers have a vested interest in PLC improvement. While portions of Fullan’s change plan may seem redundant or long-winded, he provides depth at a time when so many reforms seem to be hastily implemented.

PLC Implementation

While the theory behind PLCs points to positive results, pragmatically implementing PLCs has mixed outcomes. For example, the idea of changing middle schools into ones that adopt PLCs poses a particular challenge due to the traditional middle school model, in which teachers are placed in interdisciplinary teams that share the same group of students. In middle schools, teachers are better able to address the particular emotional, psychological, and needs of middle-level students because a team of interdisciplinary teachers shares the same group of students (AMLE, 2010). Teachers share a common planning time with the goal of ensuring all
students’ needs are being met. However, because interdisciplinary team time is already built into the day, it is logistically difficult to build additional time for collaboration with same subject and grade level teachers. Studies of middle school PLCs have shown mixed results (Dallas, 2006; Graham, 2007; Hipp, Huffman, Pankaka, & Oliver, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Pancucci, 2008; Patterson, 2006).

Positive Results of PLCs

Dallas (2006) conducted a study of a low performing middle school, specifically concentrating on the sixth-grade language arts PLC. PLCs were found to have a slightly positive impact on student test scores. Teachers also reported stronger teacher-relationships, effective collaboration, and greater implementation of curriculum reforms (Dallas). One unique aspect of this study was that 42% of the staff was new to the school, including 22% of teachers who were uncertified. Because the new staff came with little background and few expectations, they relied on and followed the direction of the veteran teachers, creating little conflict or difference of opinion within meetings. Decisions were easily made; an entire year-long scope and sequence was completed at the end of one meeting. These results, therefore, could not be generalized to all middle schools but rather to ones that currently have a significant number of new or temporary staff. While this collaborative situation was defined as a PLC, little sharing, exchanging, or merging of ideas took place and, therefore, may be better defined as an effective teacher-led initiative.

Graham (2007) conducted a mixed-methods study of PLCs within a first-year middle school and determined that if used as intended, PLCs greatly improve how teachers are teaching.
He found that in the best circumstances, exceptional teacher improvements could occur if the school and individual teachers agree on a common goal, want to establish a sense of community, put leadership in the hands of the PLCs, are willing to compromise, and have a willingness to deviate from previous teaching practices. Teachers noted the common planning time, the school’s block scheduling, and professional development time devoted to collaboration were main reasons for the success of the PLCs. However, because this study looked at a first-year middle school where the principal hired staff based on their willingness to engage in PLCs, these results are not transferable to typical middle schools. Additionally, in this school, teachers only taught one subject, whereas in many middle schools, teachers are asked to teach multiple subject areas. This makes a difference when incorporating planning time into the school day because teachers only needed to meet with one PLC team, when in reality, many middle schools need to find a way to have teachers meet in multiple PLC teams.

To specifically locate the factors that resulted in sustainable PLCs, Hipp et al. (2008) completed qualitative research in two schools (K-8 and 6-8) on their evolution as PLCs after successfully implementing PLCs for over 10 years. These schools were both deemed successful because staff members showed continued optimism, pride, and devotion. PLCs were embedded in their school’s culture. Leadership was shared between administrators and teacher-leaders, and staff members sought to continually improve their instruction. Hipp et al. came to the conclusion that, “For change to impact learning, it must focus on instructional practice” (p. 192). This article shows that PLCs have staying power, but the perspective was told with great optimism. Few challenges, complaints, or issues were mentioned in the article, suggesting an unbalanced analysis of the successes and challenges facing schools who implement PLCs.
More specific to social studies, Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) completed a study of a yearlong professional development program known as the Wayne Schools Geography Project that provided teachers with “resources and knowhow needed to better use new knowledge, strategies, and materials for teaching the targeted social studies content area” (p. 58). While this was not a specific PLC, the study did have collaborative teams of teachers who shared common subject areas and goals. A variety of survey instruments were used, including a 40-question survey about teaching practices and activities, a pre-test/post-test that focused on social-studies related geographic understandings, teacher observations, a focus group, and an assessment survey. Ultimately, the study found that after 109 hours of professional development and workshops paired with universities, “teachers felt more confident and competent in teaching social studies content, utilized provide resources to enhance and extend instruction, and developed a sense of community amongst each other from which a Collaborative Community of Professional Teachers (CCPT) evolved” (p. 69). Notable in this study was the fact that teachers were not reliant on one another for expertise. They brought in professors as experts, and a collaborative community developed as a result of the project rather than at the initial starting point. However, lessons can be taken from this research, in that partnerships with local universities could enhance PLC instruction or teachers should be encouraged to engage in social studies classes and bring that information back to their PLCs. Also, the variety of assessment tools provided an interesting quantitative component to professional development research and could be utilized in future PLC research.

DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) describe PLC time at the middle level, noting “every teacher was assigned to both a horizontal interdisciplinary team that meets daily
for forty-five minutes and a vertical content team that meets monthly or bimonthly for either 60 or 120 minutes” (p. 88). They additionally note teachers who teach the same content identify the intended learning targets…. [and a teacher] advises students how they will be expected to demonstrate their mastery, creates a series of common formative assessments to monitor student learning, and stipulates the level of mastery a student must achieve on the assessment in order to be considered proficient (p. 89).

This is quite a task for the amount of time that has been allocated to the teachers, and in reality, would be seemingly difficult if teachers were not familiar with the content of their subject area. However, as subject-area PLC teams become more familiar with content, efficiency has the potential to improve.

**Mixed Results of PLCs**

While some studies evoke great optimism, Pancucci (2008) completed a study of an elementary and intermediate school (grades K-8) through the first year of a PLC creation from a more practical perspective. In this study, Pancucci completed a qualitative ethnography using personal observations with an attempt to identify the “gap between the espoused theory and the actual experience of implementing a learning community” (p. 63). When building the board-mandated PLCs, the teachers faced challenges achieving shared goals where conflict was almost inevitable. The teachers felt as if the administration was ordering collaboration without really selling the staff on the need for PLCs. To prevent this from happening in other districts, Pancucci identified the great need for power to shift to a teacher-led, or bottom-up, style of administration in which teachers are engaged and a part of implementing PLCs. He completed this study within the school where he taught, and therefore, the results could reflect his bias. Mullen and Hutinger (2008) agree with the need for a teacher-led change plan, citing that for PLCs to be truly
effective, the role of the principal should be one of facilitating and maintaining PLC teams rather than ordering and requiring additional mandates.

Patterson (2006) found similar administration conflicts after completing a study of two culturally diverse middle schools in the process of implementing PLCs. His results show very mixed views of the success of PLCs, particularly between the perceptions of administrators versus teachers. Teachers were not convinced of the need for PLCs and felt it was forced on them by the administration with little background or training, saying, “This is what will happen” (p. 24). In both of the schools, the structure of an interdisciplinary team focused on the development of the child was dropped in favor of departmental teaming, a factor teachers overwhelmingly found less effective for the needs of individual students. Patterson came to the conclusion that teachers were confused about the idea of PLCs. To assist with implementation in the future, Patterson suggested that “in the middle school context, teachers need to clarify the similarities and differences between middle school teams, small learning communities, and professional learning communities” (p. 26). Patterson came to the conclusion that PLCs were not worthwhile at the middle school level unless teachers were leading the reform. DuFour (2007b) actually wrote a response to this study, defending PLCs and citing the school’s incorrect definition and implementation of PLCs.

Coinciding with these mixed reviews, Nelson (2008) completed an in-depth qualitative study of three schools (one 9th-12th grade, one 6th-12th grade, and one 6th-8th grade) and how PLCs functioned within the realm of the subject of science. In the 6-12 science PLC, it was found that most discourse surrounded definitions and disagreements of high-quality learning, methods of data collection, formative assessment, and the development of rubrics than of actual
instruction. Teachers were “unable to negotiate these differences and develop a common teaching action to implement” (p. 569). In contrast, the 6-8 science PLC was able to move beyond discourse to actually implement the desired practices within the classroom. Nelson suggested the differences between the schools could be attributed to the school’s commitment to inquiry and transformation of learning. They started out the year by looking at student work, determining expectations, and specifically relating this information to classroom activities. The 6-8 PLC developed an inquiry stance, sought to learn together, and “changed their instruction to incorporate these new understandings and continued to learn by collectively reflecting upon the impact on their students’ academic achievement” (p. 575). This study offers an insight into the potential of PLC discourse to positively impact instruction, yet because it solely focused on changes within the teacher-leader science classroom, results cannot be generalized to all subject areas or teachers.

Sims and Penny (2014) also found less than idea results. They completed a qualitative case study of a high school PLC known as a Data Team, examining teachers’ perceptions and their effect on their classrooms. Because the focus on the PLC was solely on data with a guided structure of what to teach each day, teachers reported that participation in the collaborative group had no, or a negative, effect on their teaching. Insufficient time, lack of pedagogy, and narrow mission contributed to its failure: “the PLC did not allow for the conversation and collaborative decisions needed to help students achieve” (p. 43).
Conclusion

Inconsistent results of PLCs at the middle school level result in the need for further research. Does the use of PLCs engage teachers in self-directed learning? Can PLCs exist alongside a traditional middle school model and be effective? Do PLCs actually improve teacher instruction, or are they seen as a teacher-directed tactic? An understanding needs to be reached as to how PLCs are pragmatically implemented at the middle school level, specifically in ways that do not sacrifice the social-emotional needs of adolescent learners. Additionally, more information needs to be understood regarding if and how teacher instruction improves as a result of utilizing PLCs within a social studies team.

Currently, there is a crisis in middle school social studies classrooms. Through the use of PLCs, teams within schools have identified improved teaching strategies and have documented growth in student test scores. However, gaps in research result in the need for a study of middle school social studies Professional Learning Communities that are already in practice to better determine ways in which teachers do use collaboration to improve their teaching.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine teachers’ perceptions and classroom integration of ideas shared within one middle school social studies Professional Learning Community. Data were collected from one suburban middle school with the goal of examining practices of a Professional Learning Community and offering thick description of how these practices translate into classroom teaching. Chapter 3 provides the methodology used within this study: research questions, research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influence teachers to change their classroom practices?
2. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?
3. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?
Research Design

The researcher completed an in-depth study that describes the implementation of a PLC. The researcher did this within the school setting during a typical school day. Because the natural setting was being studied, the researcher was “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). The researcher observed the phenomena of PLCs in the natural school setting, identifying how the daily lives of teachers are changed.

As a qualitative study, one of the researcher’s main goals was thick description. The main purpose was to create a feeling for readers that they are experiencing the various events described within the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher attempted to transport the readers to this particular setting through a narrative account of the teachers’ perceptions of PLC implementation and its effect on classroom teaching.

Phenomenological Case Study

Beyond a general qualitative study, a phenomenological case study approach was specifically selected as the research tool. A case study was used because it can explain details about various types of phenomenon that cannot be understood through the use of a survey (Yin, 2009). Case studies also describe interventions as they are happening, illustrate various topics, enlighten assorted unintended outcomes of the intervention, and “allow investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). According to Yin, case studies should be used if questions start with how or why, the researcher has no control, and a real-life phenomenon is being studied. The goals of this research fit with this definition, providing a
logical basis for the choices behind the researcher’s study. The unit of analysis was one middle school social studies PLC and three teachers within that PLC.

Because this case was examining the subjective opinions and experiences with a particular PLC, it employed phenomenological tools. The researcher was seeking to understand PLCs from the viewpoint of those most affected by its implementation: teachers. The goal, through phenomenological research, was to understand “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Interviews were structured to gain an in-depth insight into a particular phenomenon, including open-ended questions that allowed “the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). Furthermore, the researcher also viewed the PLC through meeting observations, classroom observations, and teacher post-observation discussions. By interweaving a series interviews, PLC meetings, classroom teaching sessions, and follow-up discussions from classroom observations, the researcher was able to better understand the phenomenon of the PLC, the teachers’ perceptions of this change, and how PLC discussions link to classroom practices.

Bracketing the Researcher’s Experience

To acknowledge the potential bias of the researcher, Creswell and Miller (2000) note beliefs and biases should be addressed early in the study, and researchers should “reflect on the social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their interpretation” (p. 127). In this study, the researcher knew some of the participants prior to beginning interviews and observations. The researcher was employed in the same district as the school during the study and had previous
experience working with some of the PLC members on committees. This connection with the research participants also allowed the researcher to gain approval for the study within the district, as trust had already been established with various administrators and teachers.

The researcher also taught middle school social studies as well as served as social studies department chair for her school, so she had a particular passion regarding the subject and its place in education. She also felt discouraged after seeing social studies become less of a priority in the elementary and middle school settings in her district. At the time the study was proposed, almost every teacher within her school was teaching one period of social studies, resulting in great frustration on the part of the teachers, who knew little of the content, as well as the students, who were often taught a curriculum based on guided reading textbook activities. After being introduced to Professional Learning Communities through a seminar led by the DuFours and attended by several teacher-leaders and the school administrators, the researcher acknowledged the potential of PLCs and collaboration to fill in teacher learning gaps that existed within her building. The biases of the researcher were set aside during the research process, with the goal of investigating the topic of social studies PLCs and their potential to impact teacher practices and change within the classroom.

Participants

To select participants for this study, the researcher contacted a variety of schools in early stages of PLC implementation. Schools were chosen that reflect current trends within middle school social studies and where many teachers within the building were teaching the subject. A letter was sent to these school administrators, informing them about the research project
(Appendix E). While many schools agreed, not all could find a PLC and group of teachers willing to take part in the study. Once a willing group was found, a seventh grade PLC, made up of 10 teachers, was selected as the subjects of the PLC observation. A letter then went out to the PLC participants informing them about the research and obtaining permission (Appendices F and H). The participants within the PLC were all 22 years of age or older and included both males and females. A diverse group of participants was targeted for the case study, with the goal of having a wide range of teaching experience, social studies background knowledge, and attitudes toward the implementation of new initiatives. While the PLC was made up of ten teachers, only three teachers from within this PLC agreed to be subjects for the case study. This could be tied to the fact that most participants taught only one section of geography and had minimal years’ experience in the social sciences, and they might have felt intimidated to have an outside researcher in their classrooms. Luckily, those participants who agreed to the study represented information-rich cases, allowing the researcher to obtain large amounts of in-depth information (Patton, 2002).

Once the three subjects agreed to participate in the study, a meeting was set up to determine future observation and interview dates. It was during this meeting that the researcher described the overarching goals of this study. The introduction forms and the consent forms were distributed, and confidentiality was stressed in an effort to ensure the privacy of the subjects (Appendix G). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all individuals and districts involved (Patton, 2002). See Table 1 for details on these three teachers.
Table 1

Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Years Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Years teaching Geography</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Social Studies Background</th>
<th>Teaching Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. John Brown</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Elementary Certification; Masters in Curriculum and Technology</td>
<td>Social Studies Department Chair; minor in history</td>
<td>4 geography; 1 math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sue Smith</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Secondary Certification (English); Masters in Educational Administration; Nationally Board Certified</td>
<td>History/geography courses in college</td>
<td>4 language arts; 1 geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Barbara Jones</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elementary Certification; Masters in Reading</td>
<td>Taught American History for 23 years; no geography education</td>
<td>4 language arts; 1 geography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

River Middle School

This study took place at River Middle School, a middle school located in a major suburban area outside of a large city. The district is known for parental participation, low mobility, and high attendance rates. According to the River Middle School Report Card, the school had 900 students enrolled at the time of the study, with an enrollment of 59.9% White, 8.3% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 15.9% Asian; 19.4% of the students were low-income, while
4.3% had a limited English proficiency. The average class size was 24 students, and each period was allocated 40 minutes for instruction. The school and district were also known for high test scores, in which 91.8% of students met or exceeded standards in reading, while 91.9% of students met or exceeded in math. River Middle School also functioned as a true middle school, in which the same group students rotated between team of varying subject-area teachers.

Teachers had an independent plan period as well as a team plan.

A ten-member, 7th grade geography PLC was observed, and teachers ranged from first-year social science teachers to those with 15 years of experience teaching geography. Most teachers within the PLC were only teaching one 40-minute period of geography, with very little background knowledge on the topic. Three teachers within that PLC team agreed to be observed and interviewed as part of this study.

Data Collection

This study employed four data collection strategies: PLC observation, classroom observation, follow-up discussions, and teacher interviews. According to Yin (2009), the use of multiple sources “allows an investigator to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues,” by bringing evidence together, or converging lines of inquiry (p. 115). The researcher was able to see how PLCs were implemented through meetings, how teachers perceived these implementations, and how teachers are using theories and ideas gained in PLCs within classrooms. Therefore, common themes were established, and a greater understanding of PLCs could be achieved.
Interviews

The interview questions were structured, probing, and sought to create rich dialogue with participants (Yin, 2009). Seidman’s (2006) tri-level interview structure was followed in which interviews were staggered over an extended period of time, questions were repeated in each interview, and additional questions were added depending on emerging themes. Throughout each interview, the teachers were asked questions about the link between their practice and the ideas encouraged or discouraged within their PLC. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour, depending on the details provided by the teacher. These interviews were conducted in places convenient and comfortable for the teacher, such as an empty classroom or the teachers’ lounge. Within the first interview, the background of the participants was established as well as the participants’ understanding of the PLC. During the second interview, participants were asked questions regarding the implementation process of the PLCs, including successes, failures, and problems. For the final interview, the teachers reflected on the process of implementation (Seidman, 2006). This period of time, coupled with repeated and probing questions, allowed “the teachers to make sense of their experiences to themselves as well as to [others]” (Nolan & Meister, 2000, p. 50). Interview questions for each interview are found in Appendix A.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were completed for the three teachers with the goal of realizing the link between teacher-perceived implementation and actual practice. Observations provided the researcher with insights that were not available through interviews, including seeing a
phenomenon from an insider’s perspective, viewing things that insiders may no longer be observing, and uncovering views that teachers may not be willing to share in interviews (Patton, 2002). Indicators identified within PLC meetings and teacher interviews drove the classroom observation analysis (Guskey, 2000). An observation protocol was created with the goal of collecting data as objectively as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The observation protocol is found in Appendix F. Indicators for educational theories changed as researcher analyzed data but included incorporating textbooks versus multiple resources, memorization versus experiential learning, interdisciplinary teaching, and including student/current issue connections. Indicators for teacher practices were identifying common activities used among the teachers, using cooperative learning, utilizing maps to engage critical thinking, and incorporating reading strategies within the lesson. These indicators changed as themes emerged from the research.

The three teachers were observed in the classroom two times each month over the course of three months. The observations lasted one class period, or approximately 40 minutes. During the observations, the researcher recorded what was happening and what was not happening in an effort to conceptualize the whole picture (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the interviews were transcribed to better analyze the teachers’ responses. To help desensitize the environment, the researcher offered full disclosure to the participants. By being completely honest regarding the research intention, and its understanding of PLCs within middle school social studies, staff members seemed less self-conscious and were more likely to present a truthful context (Patton, 2002).
Post-Observation Conferences

After observing lessons, post-observations conferences were completed for three of the six lessons. The purpose of these conversations was to understand where the lesson ideas originated and to better understand the theory behind the practice. While observing a teacher provides access to their behavior, “interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). This was an essential step in connecting the PLC meetings to activities the teachers chose to use in the classroom. Each post-observation conference lasted about 30 minutes, and these conversations were transcribed to allow the researcher to better analyze the data.

PLC Observations

PLC observations were completed in an effort to identify indicators from the teacher-leader or administrator about the goals and purpose of the PLC. Two observations of PLC meetings each month occurred over the course of three months. The same protocol was used to complete all observations (Appendix B). The researcher used information gained from the PLC to structure her classroom observations and interviews. For example, if PLC meetings were focused on using targets, engaging students through activities, and using primary sources, these were the indicators the researcher used in her observations and interviews to see if material learned or suggested in PLC meetings transitioned into classroom practice.

While in PLC meetings, the researcher recorded notes on the social environment. Insights were reached after seeing how participants interacted and behaved toward each other
during planned and unplanned activities, along with seeing how decisions were made within the group (Patton, 2002). The sequence of the meeting also provided insights into PLCs, including the introduction, discussion or activities, and the closure. Within this observation, the following questions were addressed: “Who is involved? What is being done by said staff and participants? How do they go about what they do?” (Patton, 2002, p. 285). These questions helped the researcher gain insight into how the PLCs are run in relation to the ideas encouraged by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2010) and Fullan (2006).

Data Analysis

Once data were collected, they were triangulated, or converged and compared, searching for “events or facts of the case study [that] have been supported by more than a single source of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 116). Data from interviews, PLC observations, and classroom observations were correlated and compared, looking for commonalities between how PLCs were managed and how teachers responded. During this process, the data were sorted in an effort to find common themes or categories (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These common themes then allowed the researcher to reach an in-depth understanding of the particular phenomenon, or PLCs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

To analyze the data, open coding was used, in which trends were identified and themes prioritized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews and field notes were coded in an effort to identify themes within PLCs, teacher perceptions, and classroom instruction. From this, axial coding was used to identify details about PLCs with a focus on creating subcategories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Selective coding and prioritizing themes were then be used to develop
categories identifying relationships between PLCs and collected data (Patton, 2002). Themes based on DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek’s (2010) definition of PLCs included initial implementation, PLC meeting focus and collaboration, and the role of assessments. Fullan’s (2006) change plan was also be used to identify themes, including motivation, capacity building, contextual learning, changing contexts, reflexive bias, tri-level engagement, and persistence.

Finally, cross-case synthesis allowed the researcher to compare data from different teachers and classroom observations (Yin, 2009). The synthesis allowed the researcher to provide insight as to why changes occurred in some areas and not others. Because the researcher was completing specific case studies with individual teachers, there was comparable evidence to show what changes had taken place within different classrooms. This allowed the researcher to draw cross-case conclusions regarding the theoretical aspects of teacher change, but it also provided insight as to why changes occurred at some areas and not others.

Other ways of analyzing data included explanation-building, in which the researcher was building a series of reasons for what she was observing, and time-series analysis, in which the researcher identified how the data responded to variant dates (Yin, 2009). With explanation-building, it was vital that the researcher connected explanations to theoretical ideas previously introduced. For example, to explain why one teacher was using ideas in her classroom over another, reference could be made to certain change plans or adult learning theories, depending on what was appropriate to the situation.

For the time-series analysis, the researcher was again looking for patterns identified prior in the theory. The researcher looked at various factors, such as how much change had occurred in the classroom, and to see if there were patterns of change over time. As Yin (2009) notes, “the
ability to trace changes over time is a major strength of case studies—which are not limited to cross-sectional or static assessments of a particular situation” (p. 145).

**Credibility Check**

To increase credibility, a reflexive journal was used, serving as a step-by-step guide through the research process (see Appendix I). The main goal of the journal was to “follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions” (Yin, 2009, p. 122). This linking of evidence allowed the reader to follow the train of thought of the researcher and others to understand how conclusions were reached. These practices allowed the results to overcome tests of reliability and increased the overall effectiveness of the research. This chain of evidence could also “take into account factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design-induced change” (Nolan & Meister, 2000, p. 47). Another purpose of this journal was to identify feelings or thoughts, figure out personal perceptions of issues, and formulate questions while taking field notes (Nolan & Meister).

Also known as member checking, interpretations were taken back to the participants with the goal of confirming credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Nolan and Meister (2000) describe such theories, noting why it benefited their research: “Member checks with the participants helped us ascertain that we had separated our views from the teachers’ perceptions” (p. 28). By completing member checks, the researcher was able to see the study through the eyes of the participants, acknowledging the importance of representing their data in an accurate manner. Member checks were completed after each interview, observation, or PLC meeting had been transcribed. After viewing the transcriptions, John Brown responded, “I Say uh
and umm a lot and have the most incoherent ramblings at times” (E-mail communication, April 23, 2012). The other teachers were similarly surprised at some of their long-winded responses to topics, but all agreed with the transcriptions. Therefore, the teachers had a full understanding of and agreed with what was being reported. Peer reviewing involved a review of the data by someone who knows the research or phenomenon in an effort to provide support and feedback to the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The peer reviewer was a fellow educator who was familiar with the research by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2010) and Fullan (2007).

After reading and reviewing the results, the peer reviewer commented,

[The researcher] paints an accurate picture of the state of social science instruction; it’s forgotten and piece-meal. Yet, she also accurately portrays the authentic solutions to this neglect. PLCs can change the attitude of teachers in relation to their work. In particular, PLCs guide teaching from experience to reflection. Every teacher must enter his or her classroom to deliver the curriculum. But not every teacher reflects on his or her practice in that delivery. Her research strengthens the connection between meaningful reflection and positive change. What do we know about the constructs of meaningful work? Work needs to be authentically-minded, mission-specific, and mastery-focused. Professional Learning Communities when used effectively can motivate meaningful work. This cause and effect process impacts both teachers and students (email communication, January 30, 2018).

By completing a reflexive journal, member checks, and a peer review, the researcher attempted to increase the credibility of her results.

Transferability

With this study, participants were limited to one school, looking at one PLC, or case, and observing three teachers within one PLC. Information from this study cannot be generalized statistically but rather analytically. This means the researcher was comparing the results to the
theory behind PLCs and change practices but not seeking to establish what Yin (2009) calls literal replication.

A similar theory is identified by Nolan and Meister (2000), in which “transferability is the burden of demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another context” (p. 45). Agreeing with Nolan and Meister, Stake (1978) suggested that generalizations are up to the reader, as they find similarities and therefore make naturalistic generalizations. This is also where rich descriptions come into play, in which readers can be transported to the setting based on detailed narrative accounts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These descriptions could include various interactions, details about specific actions, and sensory details providing a vivid image of how participants are really feeling.

Stake (1978) contended it is natural to make implicit comparisons and therefore generalize the results to other circumstances if readers are able to identify with the components of this study. While some type of replication or generalization may result, by having a flexible design method, the researcher was able to change her theory or focus during the course of her study.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the phenomenological case study methodology used in the study. Information included descriptions of the research design and questions, participants, data collection, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 4 will focus on the participants in context.
CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANTS IN CONTEXT

The participants of this study included one ten-member, 7th grade geography PLC. They were in their first full year of PLC implementation and met once a week for 40 minutes. While previously the core team of teachers met each day to talk about students, after PLC implementation they only had three days a week to meet with their team. The other team-plan time was spent attending a PLC meeting for the additional subject taught by the teachers. John Brown recalled,

There are some people who are saying, ‘We’re losing our whole middle school philosophy and our whole interdisciplinary teams, and we should just go back to meeting five days a week as a team.’ And there are other people who are saying, ‘Let’s just drop the whole teaming thing and move on to a junior high philosophy and you don’t necessarily worry about that interdisciplinary team.’ (Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

When asked if teams could go away at the middle school level, Barbara Jones made it clear she felt they were vital:

I think middle school is like the last house on the block, and then we push you out into the cold world. We have a way of organizing our kids and talking to them and getting to know them. The social worker’s involved, the counselor’s involved. I find that helpful [and] would hate to lose that. (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

Instead of choosing to take the middle school or PLC route, the school decided to incorporate the junior high model with PLCs.
Introduction of the PLCs

Professional Learning Communities were first introduced in the spring of 2010. At that time, teachers who were members of the Building Leadership Team or filled the role of the department chairs were asked to attend DuFour PLC trainings. This involved a one-day training in which teachers went to hear the DuFours speak about successful Professional Learning Communities and participated in breakout sessions with grade-level specific schools.

Before PLCs were introduced, the teachers participated in professional collaboration called Grade-level Curriculum Meetings, or GCMs. These took place as infrequently as once a month or as often as once a week and were organized by the department chair. During these meetings, the teachers shared the ways in which they were differentiating instruction for their students, and many saw PLCs as a logical transition. However, much of the social studies curriculum during that time was disorganized at a district level, according to a few teachers, and they were forced to develop the social studies on their own. For example, when John Brown first started in the district 11 years prior, he remembered that the “curriculum we were given was archaic and in a handwritten binder. So, we kind of made stuff up as we went. And that’s really how we got through the first couple of years of just reading” the textbook (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Before learning targets were created as a district, the time spent in GCMs was also for deciding what would be taught. John Brown recalls that when deciding what to teach about Europe, they would “cherry pick” the curriculum: “you’ve been to France, let’s talk about France. And Germany seems like an interesting thing to talk about reunification.’ So we cherry picked everything: we will cover this country, but we will not cover that country” (J. Brown, Interview 1, November 1, 2011).
Between the 2007-2010 school years, the district decided that all subject areas should have specific learning targets. While veteran teachers found these targets constricting and frustrating, consistency was at least attempted among schools and teachers. During this time, teachers would go to each other on their own time to brainstorm ideas. Sue Smith recalled, “We had a couple of great go-to people like John Brown and some others, so a lot of the materials were common that way. You’re doing a PLC without realizing it, informally.” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). For example, prior to fully implementing PLCs, there were three new social studies teachers on one team, each teaching one period. When it came to learning the content and best practice, the teachers just did the best they could: “Who did they have to go to but one another and the book…and just trying to figure it out together?” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). These new teachers felt helpless and frustrated, especially since it was not their main curricular focus.

Teacher’s Perceptions of PLCs

After the 2010 school year, the department heads and team leaders of River Middle School were given one of the DuFours’ books about PLCs and asked to read it. After reading through it, John Brown felt unsure: “Well, okay, this is an author who’s got a product to spin, and so they’re obviously going to paint a very rosy picture” (Interview 3, January 24, 2012). The department heads and team leaders then attended one of the DuFour conferences. John Brown remembered:
There was a school from [a different suburb] that had been doing [PLCs] for five years. When they put up their test scores and said ‘Here’s where we were at beforehand. Here’s where we were at year one, year two, year three’...then all of a sudden, years four and five they had these huge jumps. You know when you can show me the data, I will suck it up and I will do whatever you tell me to do. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

After attending the DuFour trainings, the school leaders came back excited. The administration also “sent large groups of faculty to go and observe those schools” who had implemented PLCs (S. Smith, Post-Observation Interview 5, December 6, 2011). John Brown remembered thinking,

If we could find a way to make this work, this would be a great thing to do: to actually be able to get together by content, develop assessments, figure out how to redevelop assessments, then take time to actually review those assessments and then do that whole intervention piece. (Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

Sue Smith felt similarly optimistic; they had spent the past few years working on differentiating instruction as grade levels, and PLCs offered “different ways to approach the same kind of problems...People who went [were] very encouraged, very excited to do it, and really hopeful that our district would kind of buy into it” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011).

Barbara Jones did not share the same excitement as her colleagues. She did not attend the training and felt jaded based on the historical trends of the school adopting new “fads” year after year. She said,

I’ll just wait and see what happens. I get jaded after all of these years. Everything goes and comes back...Just because a few people have gone and they thought it was cool doesn’t mean you can jump right into something they’ve been doing for five years. So, how can we do this step by step? (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

To implement PLCs as a building, changes needed to be made, especially pertaining to scheduling. By January 2011, the PLCs were minimally implemented in which PLCs came up with norms, developed one short common assessment and met about twice each month. During this time, the administration did collect artifacts to show their success. Then the seventh-grade
team said, “‘we want to modify the schedule. We want to meet more often. We’re willing to give
up more in our disciplinary team time to do it.’ And [the principal] approved that, so we got
some more things accomplished that way” (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011). Once the
PLCs started meeting regularly, some teachers did not feel as if they were gaining much from the
interactions:

It was frustrating [because] in my mind I wanted our PLCs. Having gone to the DuFour
training, I wanted our PLCs to be like, ‘let’s start making some Common Assessments.
Let’s spend meetings analyzing those assessments. Let’s figure how to re-teach those
things that were failing’. We were nowhere near that point…we need to first figure out
how to teach the curriculum. (J. Brown, Interview 2, November 1, 2011)

This varied response to PLCs continued as a trend throughout the school year. Teachers wanted
different things from their time together. Some PLCs met in groups with the goal of creating
common assessments, but that was a challenge for the social studies group, as many did not yet
know the curriculum.

The PLCs were fully implemented at the start of the 2011-2012 school year. They started
out the year setting up norms and discussing their professionalism as a group. More specifically,
discussions even took place based on “what we value, what’s important, even just as small as
having their computer up. Will you be professional enough to tell somebody, ‘Put your computer
away?’” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). These discussions led to feelings of greater
buy-in and productivity as a group: “It’s definitely a huge improvement over where we were at
last year so that’s been a very good feeling” (J. Brown, Interview 1, November 1, 2011).
District Support and Priorities

This trend of having many teachers teach one period of social studies is commonly seen within the district. All three teachers referenced this fact multiple times and let the researcher know that teachers did not have the opportunity to become experts in anything, as they were constantly being asked to move grade level and content area. Some years, teachers were angry about being asked to teach the subject, but John Brown felt positive about the PLC group during the year of implementation: “I think [they] enjoy teaching it, but they don’t have the same knowledge-base, and because they’re only teaching it one time a day, they’re not as invested in it as they might be if it was three or four sections a day” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011). This observation contrasts with the math PLC, as John Brown noted: “In our math PLC, no one is a one section teacher…so, I think there’s more buy-in. If I feel this is really important, I need to make sure that I know what’s going on” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011). While there was buy-in on PLCs this particular year, John Brown explained why many teachers felt frustrated at the fact that the entirety of PLCs was not implemented, including the inclusion of time for student enrichment and interventions:

I would love it if we could find a way to really have full-on PLCs, where there was that re-teaching component as well: developing an assessment, discussing it, figuring out which kids need re-teaching in that, to go through like the DuFour model, but actually like do the whole thing. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

He noted the “typical” district response to a new initiative was,

We’re going to try this, but we’re not going to try it the way it’s supposed to be tried. We’re going to try it our own, special way. It seems like we’re doing it half [effort]. If we’re not going to actually go through and do the whole thing then, I mean it’s, then don’t say we’re doing PLCs. (Interview 2, December 6, 2013)
When asked about the future of PLCs, Sue Smith responded with both her hopes and fears:

The optimist in me hopes that we just kind of continue on this path and let it really develop organically. If this is something that somebody obviously created to better things for students, then if we’re working at that and then we see how things can grow and we get more comfortable and we get better at working with one another in creating common materials, then, then the next step will develop itself naturally. That’s my hope. My fear is that this will be a fad that will be gone in a couple years. That’s my fear. That we’ll be on somebody else’s bandwagon. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Seventh Grade PLC

The seventh-grade world geography PLC consisted of 10 members and ranged from novice social studies teachers to those with 15 years of experience teaching geography. A total of six Professional Learning Community meetings were observed in a three-month period from November 2011 to January 2012, each taking place from 10:18-10:58 a.m. During the meetings, the three seventh grade academic teams rotated leadership depending on the trimester. The researcher observed two of these teams leading the meetings, in which they decided on the topic to be discussed, sent out expectations and an agenda prior to the meeting, and provided notes and follow up assignments after the group met. When explaining how the group functioned as a whole, Sue Smith noted “there was kind of a natural trust with the group and a professionalism that’s there… It did just happen” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011).

In terms of the backgrounds of the teachers, most of them came in with little or no knowledge of geography:

I would say the majority started from scratch…but [some] have taught for so long that [they] have become experts. It’s got to be interesting to say, ‘I don’t have any background in this. I don’t have any expertise. I’m even new to seventh grade, and I’ve been teaching for 20 years.’ (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)
This helpless feeling was often shown in the meetings themselves as well as veteran teachers were forced to try and understand the content, while others kept quiet.

At the beginning of the year, the PLCs were also given direction to create assessments and go over data, but much of the time spent in PLCs was up to the group decisions:

DuFour calls that the tight and loose. I think [the administration is] trying to figure out what that is and be true to that as much as possible. I think the PLC’s direction is pretty clear. But, when then you’re meeting with a group over time, once a week, that direction kind of get lost quickly, especially if it’s a large group. (S. Smith, Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

Mr. John Brown

As of the 2011-2012 school year, Mr. John Brown had 15 years of teaching experience. He received elementary certification and spent his first years teaching at a Catholic junior high. He wanted to become an educator because he wanted to love his job. He had had a social studies teacher in high school who emanated excitement: “Watching him and seeing him and seeing how much he loved what he was doing…it cemented in my mind that this is what I want to do” (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011). Three of those years, John Brown devoted all of his time to seventh grade world geography, and for 12 years, he taught science or math.

John Brown had a strong background, love of, and devotion to the teaching of the social studies. While he had a minor in history, none of those hours were specifically relating to geography. When he was hired to teach geography, he remembered it as “baptism by fire”, in which he greatly relied on another experienced colleague for support (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). During that time, “we kind of made up stuff as we went. So we taught whatever we were interested in…There was no accountability, no one had a clue of what was going on in my room
or if I was doing a good job” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Over time, John Brown became a more active leader, serving on the district curriculum committee for seventh grade social studies. This is a role that “fell onto [him] out of necessity” (Interview 2, December 6). He also acted as the Social studies Department Chair of River Middle School.

When John Brown first started teaching, his school was on a junior high model, in which he reflected, “I talked to nobody while I was there. I didn’t know any of my colleagues” (Interview 2, December 6, 2013). When he first started at River Middle School, he found the big difference was that there was “some kind of accountability here where whatever I was doing had to gel with what the other three or four people on our team were doing” (Interview 2, December 6, 2013).

While he found that communication to be positive, for the most part, “they had their interdisciplinary Units that they had been rolling out for 20 years in a row. It drove me crazy because I didn’t actually go with anybody’s curriculum. In social studies we did this island unit, but it was places we never studied once in our curriculum” (Interview 2, December 6, 2013). He was soon able to move teams. When given large amounts of team time “we actually found those natural connections or those natural bridges that connected things, we were able to go ahead and do things. We had the right people and a pod in the building” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011).

That uncertainty between the middle school model versus the junior high philosophy has now come back into play with PLCs, and John Brown felt uncertain about it:

The question of are we a Middle School or are we a Junior High? It’s something that somebody mentioned at some meeting I was at. And it’s, it’s a good question, because you know, if we want to meet by Departments that makes up more of a Junior High Model. If we want to meet by Interdisciplinary Teams, then we’re at the whole Middle School Model. And right now we’re kind of like a hybrid of both, and I don’t necessarily know if that’s what we’re supposed to be. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)
Throughout the study, teachers within the PLC relied on John Brown for his passion regarding the subject of geography, and his intensity also led to disagreements with those teachers who relied on teacher-centered methods of instruction.

Mrs. Sue Smith

Mrs. Sue Smith had recently completed her National Board Certification and had 17 years teaching experience, specifically focusing on high school and upper level English courses. She also had an endorsement in computers, which is evident in the way she used technology in her classroom. She had a particular passion for teaching, deciding she wanted to be a teacher after watching her mother work as a speech pathologist: “I feel like it’s a gift. It’s a great job” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011). She has a Master’s in Educational Administration, which she used while serving as a dean in a high school in which she was previously employed. She had taught at River Middle School for six years at the seventh-grade level, teaching one period of social studies and the remainder language arts.

While she had some experience in taking history courses in college, she fulfilled the basic requirements for an education degree and primarily focused on her secondary English teaching certification. However, when asked about her feelings regarding teaching social studies, she said,

I absolutely love it. I just think it’s so fascinating and fabulous and the kids are so engaged, but my philosophy is different from others… The content is a tool in which to teach the kids; I have a hard time with people who over the years have said, ‘I’m not a social science teacher. This isn’t my content area. It’s not my background’. You have to study to be a good teacher. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

When she was asked to attend the DuFour trainings as a team leader, Sue Smith recalls, “We came back, and the people who went were very encouraged, very excited to do [PLCs], and
really hopeful that our district would buy into it” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011). While she did not have a high level of expertise in world geography, she was excited for the potential of PLCs. This positive attitude carried her throughout the course of the study, in which she often served as a mediator between varying pedagogical conversations. Even though she only had two years’ experience teaching geography, she was fully invested in the subject, constantly looking for new ideas and ways to engage students in learning about the world.

Mrs. Barbara Jones

Mrs. Barbara Jones was excited to proclaim she has completed 33 years of teaching and only had three more years before retirement. She knew she wanted to be a teacher when she was only six years old, but often found school challenging for her. She remembered, “I was tutored; I had a lot of struggles in school...everything came late in life. So, now I know how the brain developed” (Interview 2, December 7, 2011). During her early years of teaching, her primary focus was reading and writing with her Elementary and Reading Specialist certification. She taught every grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grades but had spent the last 20 years at the middle school level.

While she had spent 23 years teaching at least one period of United States history, even after she failed the course in college and was forced to retake it for a D, this was only her second year of teaching one period of world geography. The prior year she was also absent for approximately 40 days due to a health concern, so she self-admittedly did not devote the time needed to the subject area. She referred to social studies as “the orphan period subject, the foster child of teaching,” but she found herself devoting large amounts of time to develop just a basic
understanding of the subject (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). She even warned her future employer that in every history class she took, she “got Ds, strait Ds, from junior high to college,” and they promptly responded with, “we don’t care. You’ve got the credits” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). In this case, “needs precedes the ability...I’ve never had a class like [world cultures] in my whole life. So it is kind of fun learning it as I teach it...I really like it” (Interview 3, January 25, 2012).

Despite her harsh reflection on her own social studies knowledge, she dove into her PLC with vigor, using almost each one of the ideas and suggestions that were shared while the researcher observed. Barbara Jones compared teaching geography and her experience within the PLC to learning to ski:

There were some very patient, great skiers who would give up slope time to help us on the bunny hill. So that in turn, when I can help someone, I had to remember to be as patient. [John Brown and Sue Smith] were ready to get up on the hill and ski. They had to say, ‘This is how we do it. This is what you need to do. You don’t need to use the book’, and we’re like, ‘But that’s all we know’...So I think they’ve been very patient, even though they’re ready to ski on the black diamond and I’m still on the bunny hill” (B. Jones, Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

Even though Barbara Jones was often uncomfortable with the material, she also noted, “I’ll try it. I’ll try anything, and I’ll tell the kids we’re trying it” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). While she knew she should try and be an expert on the subject, she also showed her students she was willing to experiment and learn alongside them. This willingness to try new things allowed this less experienced teacher to benefit from the collaboration time each week in PLCs.
Conclusion

This chapter identified and described the participants in context. The experiences of these three willing participants, along with the ten members of the PLC, will be highlighted throughout the next chapters. Chapter 5 will share the results of the study.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

This study examined the teachers’ perceptions and classroom integration of ideas shared within one middle school social studies Professional Learning Community (PLC). The researcher examined the use of ideas shared in PLCs by conducting teacher interviews, PLC observations, classroom observations, and follow-up discussions. In the next section, the findings are reported for each of the three research questions that guided this study:

1. What types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influence teachers to modify their classroom practices?
2. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?
3. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?

To maintain confidentiality, the school is referred to as River Middle School, while the teachers are identified as Mr. John Brown, Mrs. Sue Smith, and Mrs. Barbara Jones. River Middle School was selected to participate in the study because the school was within its first full year of PLC implementation. The school also reflected current trends in middle school social studies, in which middle school teachers were asked to teach the subject even though they may not have sufficient background in the subject (Baldi et al., 2015).
Findings

To collect data pertaining to the PLCs and application of PLC discussions during that time, multiple sources of evidence were used, including teacher interviews, PLC observations, teacher observations, and follow-up teacher discussions. To analyze the data, open coding was used, in which trends were identified and themes were prioritized. Interviews and field notes were coded to identify themes within PLCs, teachers’ perceptions, and classroom instruction. From this, axial coding was used to identify details about PLCs with a focus on creating subcategories. Selective coding and prioritizing themes were then used to develop categories identifying relationships between PLCs and collected data. Finally, cross-case synthesis allowed the researcher to compare data from different teachers and classroom observations. These data reflect responses from the three teachers along with comments from within the ten-member seventh grade social studies PLC.

Research Question 1: Learning Targets and Assessments

The first research question investigated the mandated activities within the PLC and how teachers then utilized that information in their own practice. Research question 1 asked: What types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influence teachers to modify their classroom practices?

Within the PLC, teachers were given varied direction from the administration of River Middle School. More specifically, the mandates of understanding and meeting district targets, facilitating district assessments, and the creation of formative assessments at a building level guided the majority of discussion within the seventh grade PLC. These mandates guided teacher
practice in the classroom, as evidenced by PLC observations, interviews, and teacher classroom observations.

**District Expectations**

First, the teachers needed to understand the district expectations when it came to curriculum. As a PLC, the teachers worked together to figure out exactly what to teach, in that “the student targets are just a guide. They’re student-friendly language to reflect the essential questions, which is our curriculum. That conversation was difficult for somebody to say, ‘Student targets aren’t a curriculum’…those were interesting conversations. They were difficult” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). This understanding of student targets and general content teachers were supposed to be providing to students was a topic brought up by all teachers observed at River Middle School. Very few members of the 10-member PLC came in with extensive background knowledge or experience in social studies. Weekly conversations about content within the PLCs were overwhelming:

We’re all kind of on the same page about which comes first, the curriculum or the assessment. It’s [curriculum], and being new, I need whatever they can give me. I’m not sure how to put it all together, because sometimes it’s like taking a sip of water out of a fire hydrant. Here are all these lessons on Europe…it all takes a lot of time. (B. Jones, Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

Teachers, especially those whose primary subject was not social studies, felt overwhelmed by all of the materials, lessons, curriculum, and assessments. They felt flooded by all of the information available and did not feel as though they had the time to understand the curriculum and plan lessons that were meaningful for students.
For all of the benefits provided by the collaboration time in PLC, there were often challenges associated, as different teachers had different goals. Barbara Jones observed, “I need ideas in PLC....The PLC in social studies has been very helpful” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). The researcher noted the following themes regarding research question 1: figuring out district mandated student targets, learning and pacing the vast content, creating school-based formative assessments, implementing district summative assessments, and analyzing the results to improve their classroom instruction.

**District Targets**

River Middle School is part of a larger district in which there are five middle schools. As a district, a set target list for each unit was established along with a guiding time frame. The vocabulary used to define the curriculum at the district level was known as the *learning targets*. The learning targets were created by the district curriculum committee, comprised of representatives from each district middle school. For each unit, teachers were given a set of learning targets, including anywhere from four to seven headings with three to five sub-headings, in both a teacher and student version. These targets covered each region of the world, starting with an introductory unit that gave an overview of geographical features as well as varying government, economic, and religious systems. Students then analyzed the statistics to draw conclusions, while a brief modern history of that location was learned. As Sue Smith noted,

> [Targets] make me conscious of why I’m doing what I’m doing and [encourages me to be] deliberate about it… [and makes] me sure to communicate what those are to the kids… For years they might have been walking out and saying, ‘well we did this and this today.’ But do they know the purpose or were they able to show me what they can do? (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)
The observer noted that during PLC meetings, teachers spent much of the time just learning the district targets. Because they better understood the targets, the teachers reported feeling more comfortable when it came to teaching the expected content. Sue Smith noted after one observation, “I didn’t think I was at a stage where I could devise [this project] because I only knew a little bit about these countries” (November 29, 2011). However, she was able to teach because of her newfound knowledge on the topic as a result of a PLC meeting and discussion that took place earlier that month.

With mandated learning targets and essential questions, experienced teachers saw a greater continuity among what was being taught at each school within the district:

I think we’re making progress as far as making sure that [we] always talk about with the written curriculum, the taught curriculum, and the actual acquired curriculum. I think we are getting to that second stage now where we are all teaching more or less the same thing. Whereas, before I still didn’t think, even though with the [previous structure] and with all the work that we had put in with the specific targets, I still thought that there was a lot of wiggle room there, whereas I think now we’re all at least attempting to teach the same curriculum. I value our time in PLCs. (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

As well as keeping the curriculum focused, the targets for each unit also served as a list of essential content all teachers must complete within the unit. As a less experienced social studies teacher, Barbara Jones noted that targets provided the guiding force for much of the PLC’s discussions:

I think [the purpose of the social science PLC is] to kind of keep all the seventh grade teachers on basically on the same page, so the students are having a pretty much an equal experience with the targets. And our targets match our assessments, so that we can kind of stay at least at the building level, pretty uniform [and] no one’s taking a wide departure. I think you can do a lot of supplemental things, as long as you meet the targets. And like [John Brown] says, ‘If you cover the target, how you cover it is, you know, up to your teaching style in your classroom.’ (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)
As a PLC, the teachers determined the most important thing to know before teaching this vast content was to actually learn the targets themselves. When asked about the purpose of the PLCs, John Brown replied:

I think it’s to get us to a more common path. Not necessarily a common instruction so much as making sure that we are truly teaching the same curriculum to all of our students in our building. There’s no way that we’re going to be able to match it up perfectly, especially in social science, where there are so many people teaching it and have so many different variations of background knowledge. (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Background knowledge was frequently referenced as a distinguishing factor in social studies classrooms at River Middle School. Because of the varying amounts of background knowledge, great amounts of time during each PLC meeting were devoted to actual history lessons and an understanding of what the teachers were actually supposed to teach. This showed that the teachers did not have enough background knowledge of the subject being taught and benefited from this PLC time to collaborate and learn designated content.

Learning the content. The district mandate of teaching the targets provided direction, but within the PLC, many teachers wanted time to simply learn what they were supposed to teach. For the most part, teachers new to the subject area appreciated the targets, as they had a guideline for completing the curriculum. However, the targets also had to be learned. John Brown reflected on the time it took going over targets:

We’re taking positive steps and figuring out [targets], but we’re going to run into some struggles if [our principal] starts saying she wants certain artifacts by a certain point in time...or if we’re told we need another assessment by January. There are so many people that don’t know what we’re talking about [in social studies], so we’re really focused on a common understanding. (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 22, 2011)
This common understanding of the material included basic understanding of history and geography along with a search for the so-called right historical answers.

**Background knowledge.** While some teachers, such as John Brown, came with years of learning about and teaching world geography, Barbara Jones had no geography education prior to teaching it one other year. She reflected on how difficult it was to learn the content and come up with a lesson plan to match content she just learned: “I told my friend last night that I’m one Xerox ahead of the kids...but [the targets] help a new teacher know [what to teach] today. Not just, here’s the book” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). Furthermore, she noted,

I don’t have the background knowledge. So what we’re doing [in PLC] is helpful. We talked about the targets… [But] some of us don’t have the same answers. How do I know what the answers are? Those who made up the targets already kind of have a common knowledge, but now they’re spreading us and this content so thin” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011).

Barbara Jones felt the time learning content in PLCs greatly helped her teaching. She was forward in meetings, asking about content and answers to the targets. When going over one unit, she asked, “What’s the answer to the target? There’s no answer to the target in the curriculum, and I’m not up to speed on a lot of this information” (PLC Observation 2, November 15, 2011).

Time was spent searching through the textbook and appropriate online sources for so-called answers. The PLC attempted to develop answers from reputable sources, but because there are many interpretations of the causes and effects, some teachers seemed more confused. One asked a question:

Where is the primary resource of this information?” to try and better teach her students and point them towards appropriate resources. While most teacher were engaged in the process of creating a common assessment, another teacher said, “I’d much rather [discuss] instruction. How are you going to get to this point with the kids and make sure they really understand it? (PLC Observation 2, November 15, 2011)
In this particular case, John Brown pointed back to the use of SharePoint and the common activities, which took the remainder of that particular PLC. The teachers were looking for specific lessons to teach tested content, and the observer noted great amounts of time were devoted to specific and detailed lessons surrounding such content. Without these PLC conversations regarding background knowledge of varying topics, teachers would most likely end up leaning on the textbook for their information. However, because they engaged in these conversations and searched for quality resources together, they reported more positive feelings about their own geographical understandings.

Finding answers. At River Middle School, PLCs served as a learning community in which teachers were provided some basic geography and history lessons during meetings, yet not all of the so-called answers were agreed upon. For example, one of the targets was to evaluate the causes of the world wars, and many teachers did not know how to answer the target or where to find the appropriate information to teach that target to students. The researcher noted that at every PLC meeting, basics of the upcoming curriculum were discussed and debated. For example, causes and effects of the world wars were discussed and taught at great length during the November 15 and November 22 meetings, where teachers listed answers to each of the targets: “What are the actual causes of World War 1?” asked one teacher, while another responded, “There’s no answers to the targets. I’m not up to speed on a lot of it”. At times, conversations such as these tended to take a while, as teachers were asking, “Where is the primary resource of this information?” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). Barbara Jones continued to reflect on this specific incident saying,
How do I know what the answer is? What are the steps for joining the EU? That’s a great target. What are they? Where do I find that information? I think the targets were made by people who did know the answers because their background is social studies. But now everybody and their brother gets a shot at social studies. Some teachers may not have it next year, which is really hard to do for a year. [It’s hard to] put your blood and sweat and tears into it if you’re just doing it for a year. (B. Jones, Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

While teachers seemed to value learning the social studies content and the time within the PLCs to brainstorm answers to the learning targets, it was not necessarily to do what the administration specifically intended, such as develop assessments and go over results. Despite meetings heavily focused on learning the content, teachers felt their overall time in PLC was beneficial. Barbara Jones, a second-year teacher in the subject, admitted “I never mind going to the social studies PLC. I feel everybody gets along and we’re sharing. The veterans are very respectful of those of us that are struggling. [John Brown] keeps a real low key, lovely temperament about it” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). Sue Smith, one of the teachers with more experience in world geography, noted,

And so with anything else, you have to start basics. We’re talk about that with maps, identifying things, or those ‘right there’ questions. Then you can build up to have a deeper thinking or deeper questioning [of] why things are in the curriculum. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Sue Smith also noted the conversations improve their teaching, but the depth of knowledge needed to implement the curriculum fully is “going to come over time. I think that really won’t develop for a couple of years. And I think that’s ok too” (Interview 3, January 24, 2012).

This level of comfort and willingness to learn led to a lot of growth between the beginning and end of the observations. During the researcher’s final interview, Barbara Jones reflected on how much she had learned through PLCs: “I’m comfortable with the material. I’m
not scrambling to find it. I have a folder. I know how we’ll do this. At PLC, we talked about where you would do [the lessons]” (Interview 3, January 25, 2012). While some teachers utilized PLCs to get new ideas, others used it as a time for reflection activities they have already done:

[PLCs] make me think: ‘How would I explain to somebody else that I did this?’ or ‘Is this working?’ It’s an added element of reflection, reminding you to [think back] and [know] you’re going to have to communicate what you’re doing to other colleagues. So, I like that part a lot. It makes me think about my teaching. (S. Smith, Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Sue Smith enjoyed that reflection piece, noting that without teaching her own colleagues about the content in PLCs, she would not have the depth of knowledge or time to think about her practices. All teachers within the PLC benefited from finding answers to various district mandated targets. They were able to sort through vast amounts of resources to agree on what perspectives should be shared with students, and meanwhile teachers within the geography PLC were able to strengthen their own knowledge and think more deeply about their own teaching practices.

**Developing Assessments**

Throughout the researcher’s observations of the seventh-grade geography Professional Learning Community, there was an attempted division of time between learning the content and creating assessments. Assessments generally took two forms: mandated district assessments created by the curriculum committee and formative assessments created within the PLC or by individual teachers.

For district assessments, there was a conflict between knowing the information needed to teach for the test and questioning the validity of the test. Before giving the district assessment for
the second trimester, revolving around the region of Russia, there were many questions such as “What does the instruction look like before the assessment?” (PLC Observation 2, November 15, 2011). Another PLC member noted, “I’d much rather discuss the instruction for the assessment” (PLC Observation 2, November 15, 2011).

Within PLCs, the ultimate goal, as dictated by the building administration, was to first develop assessments that test the intended targets. Then the teachers would reflect on those results to improve one’s teaching as well as stage interventions for students who were not mastering the targets. This review of a previous assessment was observed on November 1, 2011, in which teachers accessed the district data “warehouse,” obtaining their own class’s results in comparison to the school and district results. When these comparisons were taking place, the teachers had a lot of questions regarding instruction prior to delivering the assessment. While some teachers asked the purpose of looking at these results, such as “What goals are we supposed to obtain?” others asked content questions such as “Should teachers refer to/explain certain vocabulary or topics?” (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011).

Questions also arose about the quality of the actual district assessment: “What do the assessment results say about the test versus the teaching?” (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011). Others felt the questions did not match the targets by saying “[we’re] not testing what is taught” (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011). When reviewing the upcoming district assessment for Russia during the PLC on December 6th, 2011, John Brown took five minutes to explain the purpose and describe its intent. In this particular instance, the district was not collecting scores, but buildings had an option to share scores with their own PLC. John Brown described, “We’re not actually reporting out on these scores, as our district has just gotten rid of
its most recent reporting system, but you can collect these scores for your own gradebook if you choose”. Another teacher asked for clarification, “So we can score this, and then share this out in PLCs, right”? The discussion continued, with many of the PLC members chiming in to decide how they would like to give the assessment. Comments included, “Then let’s be consistent. How should we instruct this? Do we want to say ‘no notes’ to the kids, or do we want to let each teacher decide”? One responded with “we don’t want the kids just regurgitating what we say, so my preference is they just use resources.” Another queried, “Are we going to use the activity we’ve used in the past that [John Brown] created? They do the same procedure for a different region.” Another PLC member continued that train of thought:

Should we all do this ahead of time? I’d be curious to see if some of us did the preview activity and some of us didn’t. The ‘preview’ almost just leads the right into the answers. I want to make sure kids aren’t just copying what we did as a class, and their answers are actually reflecting what they’re able to figure out on their own” (PLC Observation 4, December 6, 2011).

The PLC came to an agreement regarding instructional practice for the assessment: “Alright, so let’s decide to not use that as a preview activity.” Discussions such as these allowed teachers to talk out the rationale behind their academic choices. The teachers wanted the results of their district assessment to be reliable, and therefore as a team, they chose not to use a particular preview activity. Teachers had buy-in to the process behind the assessment and fully engaged in conversation as a result.

Beyond district assessments, the PLCs were given a goal from the administration that each PLC should try and develop formative assessments for each unit and then pass those assessments on to the administration (S. Smith, Interview 2, December 7, 2011). The guidelines were “develop an assessment…a formative assessment this time rather than [one at the] end of a
unit. Take a look at your results. Have some discussion about it. And see where you need to go from there” (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012). The seventh-grade social studies PLC decided that their “target is to do one a trimester as a building assessment that we’re all going to do. [It helps us] stay true to the time frames of the curriculum” (J. Brown, PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011).

Each PLC was tasked with developing and creating an assessment the teachers felt was effective. After that “we would implement that assessment with integrity and based on the conversations and agreements that we’ve had as a group” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Each teacher would then use this assessment within his/her classroom. Discussions took place to try and develop something that was helpful and meaningful to the teachers, therefore enhancing or replacing some form of assessment they were already using. As John Brown reflected on the process, he noted,

We’ve developed a few assessments, none of which we are incredibly proud of, but I think that the process of developing them has been a good thing. We did come up with the understanding [that] these are the key things that we have to make sure that we’re talking about here. I think we were looking to come up with a better understanding for ourselves of what we really valued and what we really thought was important curriculum rather than just all these targets are the same. (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2013)

When developing an assessment for the region of Europe, one PLC member suggested, “We [should] create matching or multiple choice that actually measures these concepts” (PLC Observation 2, November 15, 2011). This shows the teachers were looking to develop high quality assessments, but they often struggled with the development of the actual tool.

While some were frustrated with the process, others, such as Sue Smith, felt that the process was valid: “There is value in the process of discussion and debate” (PLC Observation 2,
November 15, 2011). As the teachers of the seventh grade PLC developed a district assessment for the country of Asia on January 24, 2012, the teachers deliberated on what to include in that unit assessment and noted they left out the first targets in each unit, which related to understanding political and physical features of each region. They decided to create a mapping quiz, focusing on major political and physical areas students should have understood as a result of the unit. During the discussion, the teachers inquired about the validity and importance of a pre versus a post assessment and how the data could be used within their PLCs. One PLC teacher made a comment, “Is it going to drive instruction? Let’s step back about where we want to go with this assessment and why we’re doing it”. They decided to give a pre and post-test on major countries within Asia, focusing their unit teaching on history and culture within those countries. While productive conversation happened during the reaction of the assessment, not all teachers were happy with the outcome. For example, John Brown felt that some assessments were being created because they were easy to develop:

We ended up picking memorizing locations, not because it was going to be important, but rather because it was an easy one for us to create an assessment for. Those are the things I wish we weren’t doing, but it’s hard…I didn’t want to voice what my real opinion was, because I didn’t want to be that block in the road. It was real easy for me to just sit there and sit back and not say a word. (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

John Brown did speak up during the January 17 PLC meeting by saying, “I have a hard time justifying to a parent why their kid needs to know where Brunei is. I have issues with memorizing. Is it an essential skill?” However, the argument was pushed by other teachers, including Sue Smith: “We’re also recognizing countries where are students are from and saying they are important enough to include in our instruction”. Another teacher said, “The point of geography is that all kids need to understand certain features”. One educator felt the assessment
was more about the process and not the end product; “I think it’s effective to discuss activities, looking at a productive model about what we did differently to determine how students learn [along with] instructional methods” (PLC Observation 6, January 24, 2012).

The seventh-grade social studies PLC gave teachers time to talk through various types of district mandates and create formative assessments, influencing the activities and work they did with students in the classroom. Discussions were not always positive: teachers were often dissatisfied with the depth of their own geographic content knowledge and frustrated with the process of creating assessments when they knew so little about the content. However, the PLC discussion time allowed them to acknowledge various vulnerabilities within the curriculum and their own classroom teaching, and encouraged teachers to investigate ways other teachers were solving similar problems. This weekly PLC time proved to be overall positive, and over time, could potentially evolve into a cohesive group that goes beyond closing knowledge gaps and developing basic assessments.

**Reviewing Assessment Data**

While only one assessment was given in the span of time the researcher observed, the data from that test were used to develop a discussion that further drove teacher instruction. At the PLC meeting on November 1, 2011, John Brown led teachers to the website that displays the data. On this particular day, they were reviewing a 25-question multiple choice district assessment given after the first trimester. “We want the item analysis...uh oh, do I have special privileges? Let me show you what you should be seeing while I figure this out” (PLC observation 1, November 1, 2011). Frequently, the observer noted issues with technology when
trying to analyze data, and those issues tended to drive conversation to a halt. Teachers also desired to view data in terms that were not available using the current technology: “Can we also look at the IEP kids? Can we pull out their scores separately? Can I see the kids who have lower reading scores?” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). With the data program in use, teachers were not able to see this separation.

Once data were obtained, teachers’ conversations abounded. One such instance was observed on November 1, 2011, regarding the purpose of analyzing the data. One teacher asked, “Should we look at our school or all of the schools? Should we look at all scores or individual teacher scores”? Another responded, “What is the goal? Is there a certain percentage we are trying to attain”? John Brown answered, “This should show us how students are doing on each question. Blue means unbelievably good job to us, it’s borderline too easy, or most of the children got it right ...yellows are a sizable chunk that are not getting it right.” One PLC teacher disagreed by saying, “Mr. [Brown], I’ll interrupt you for just a second. Color coding is more about the quality of the question than the student or it could be the quality of instruction?” Another teacher asked, “How do you prove question versus quality of instruction”? John Brown answered with, “It could be easy or teachers are doing a good job. It’s not always about the student. We can dive into the quality of the question as well. Especially with all of this [data]”. While these type of conversations did not necessarily obtain specific results, they allowed teachers to talk through their questions and ultimately better understand what they were doing and why they were doing it.

Other interesting questions that resulted from looking at student data included the use of difficult vocabulary words ‘Descriptor is a hard word” and “Did everyone refer to the regions as
‘tropics’? I don’t know if that’s a term that I used,” reflected another participant. Other teachers verbally agreed, “Here are tropics, between Tropic of Cancer and Capricorn, but I referred to it as low-latitude climate. But in our discussion, I heard low-latitude” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). To answer the questions and move forward with the discussion, John Brown responded, “If this assessment still continues on to next year, we just need to make sure we use tropic as well as low-latitude” (PLC observation 1, November 1, 2011). John Brown often served as the mediator between different issues, encouraging teachers to move forward with their discussion.

John Brown also read aloud observations from his own students’ work, publicly admitting areas of weakness in front of his PLC members: “My kids had no clue on that one. Only nine got it right. I thought I covered it a lot.” The observer noted that when John Brown shared his data observations, others were more willing to share their own thoughts. Looking at the data, however, can make some teachers feel vulnerable, especially those who feel less confident about their own background knowledge or teaching ability in geography. Barbara Jones noted that her main goal within the PLC was to participate:

> When we’re analyzing some of the tests, I felt comfortable saying, ‘I don’t know that this is worded well, or I don’t think we covered that well...I feel safe in there. I don’t think, I don’t even care if they talk about it. No one’s really interested [in your mistakes].” (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

When this conversation did take place as a PLC, only one teacher outwardly admitted, “Wow, that’s an area I really need to work on with my kids” (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011). After the PLC created one assessment, Sue Smith said they agreed

> [They] would be open to discussing it and analyzing it based on our student performance... That’s people taking a risk in front of others. It’s kind of the first time that happened, but I think everybody probably feels a little nervous about that. You wanted to see, did I perform as a teacher? Did I do what I needed to do? If you looked
you could start to see what teachers were doing well in one area or another and that’s a lot of vulnerability. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

Barbara Jones said that going over the results of the common assessments was very helpful:

They help me. We just analyzed one set I gave. I gave a common assessment, and as we go through the data, [I thought] Is it the question? Is it the student? Is it the teacher? And I can look through and see what parts are me. Like maybe I didn’t it that hard enough. Maybe next year I’ll hit it a little differently and take out my information and use it to see why they didn’t know about weather and climate? (Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

When Barbara Jones admitted her area of weakness, Sue Smith acknowledged, “I think that takes a lot of guts. She’s been teaching for a long time. There was kind of a natural trust with the group, and a professionalism that’s there” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011).

John Brown felt positive about this data-driven discussion that took place:

[Teachers were] looking at the targets that we weren’t doing extremely well at all. Once we got past ‘let’s analyze the question and try to determine why this question is bad’, we finally realized that sometimes it’s just a case of our kids don’t know it. It helped us understand [what] we need to do next year. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Sue Smith ended the discussion with a suggestion for individual teacher use: “I think this is an awesome tool. I like comparing the group results to my own students. That will tell about my own instruction. And then maybe we can come together next time and go over those thoughts” (PLC observation 1, November 1, 2011). The observer noted that over the course of her observations, each teacher separately mentioned climate in various lessons over the next month, which was the lowest scoring question overall.

In fact, once this district assessment was analyzed, as a PLC they developed a school formative assessment that was a response to weak scores on the climate portions of the district assessment:
Not that we did bad on climate, but it was not our strongest thing. I think going back and actually looking at the questions [where] we didn’t do well, looking at the targets that they align to, we were able to make some really positive decisions about what we need to do. (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

When further reflecting on that discussion, S. Smith noted:

We discovered that we have science teacher that is teaching both science and social studies, which is not uncommon, but it’s the first time that we’ve been able to discuss that there’s a crossover in the curriculum, and the climates and the terms are different. We didn’t realize a conflict that [the students] are probably having without knowing that how these teachers presented it differently. (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

While discoveries like this at first “create some frustration, but then ultimately really important discoveries. We are spending time just clarifying the curriculum as well because we have so many one section people doing this for the first time” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011).

However, discussion about assessment results are few and far between because “part of the problem is that we don’t have that many assessments” (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012). Over time, more assessments will be created, but that is not the only goal:

I think as a group, one of the things that we want to do is actually use our assessment data better. [We] will actually go back and look at which are the questions that we are struggling at and at least try to figure out is it lack of instruction…trying to figure out why our students didn’t do as well on those ones. (J. Brown, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

Data can prove to be a real motivator for many teachers: “When you can show me the data, I will suck it up and I will do whatever you tell me to do. If you can show me the data that’s going to prove that this is going to be better, that’s my main motivation” (J. Brown, Interview 6, January 24, 2012). Barbara Jones noted that this process of sifting through data takes a lot of work: “It’s labor intensive but very valuable in the long run. If you put your work [creating a quality
assessment] in at the front end of things, it’s worth it in the long run” (Interview 2, December 7, 2011).

Within the PLC, the teachers spent great amounts of time talking about various district and school mandates, including learning targets, assessments, and data. Teachers’ classroom practices were then influenced by the discussions in which they used knowledge learned within PLC meetings to apply to classroom situations, engaged in debates over the merit of assessments, and tied their own teaching to the validity of the assessment questions. The reflection time during their PLCs allowed the teachers to decipher the meaning behind district learning targets and create agreed-upon assessments that they all took back to their classrooms. PLCs provided teachers with the time to evaluate past knowledge, learn vital content, and think through their practices, positively impacting their understanding of geography and their overall classroom practices. The mandates provided by the district and administration gave them a framework of targets and assessments to start conversations, and because of these conversations, a greater geographic understanding resulted.

However, many questions came up as part of these discussions, and it became clear that there were varying theories regarding best practices in geography. For example, while the PLC members might have agreed on the effects of population density in Asia, Barbara Jones had the students read a section out of the textbook and answered QAR questions (Observation 5, January 20, 2012), while John Brown provided students with a variety of articles online, asking students to “make a brief recommendation to the Chinese government regarding population issues” (Observation 6, January 24, 2012). These varying types of disagreements regarding the theory behind their instructional choices resulted in heated discussions within the PLC meetings, yet
discussions of varying teaching approaches also allowed teachers to be exposed to a variety of new methodology.

**Research Question 2: Educational Theory in PLCs**

The second research question (How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?) looked at the educational theory behind the PLC discussions and how those various theories impacted teachers within their classrooms.

While the administration specifically requested the PLCs to create common assessments, the actual theory or reasoning behind their requests was not shared with the teachers. The theory behind assessments, teaching strategies, common targets, or even collaboration was missing from the PLC meetings. The teachers were not given any particular literature or articles on best practice in social studies:

I’ve gone back and shared, when I’ve gone to the social science institute. I think none of us have ever thought about taking the time to read through an article because we’ve got so many other things that we want to get done or feel like we need to get done, that’s the least of our concerns. (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

At River Middle School, discussions of theory were absent from their professional development.

Therefore, when asked about theories driving their instruction, the participants responded with confusion or ideas dating back to their time studying education as undergraduates. When asked about theories encouraged within their PLC during her first interview, Barbara Jones, responded with “I really feel like such a novice in there that I marvel at how [John Brown]
covers so much so fast” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). Even when probed regarding theories, no answer related to traditional educational theories emerged. John Brown was asked the same question and responded with “Nothing truly jumps out at me as far as any kind of theories that are out there. I think something that we need to address better... we don’t, and especially with this curriculum” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). This question was replicated at each interview, and B. Jones at her third interview responded with, “I don’t know, I don’t remember theories. I’m so old, what are theories? I think lately using…reading strategies” (Interview 3, January 25, 2012). Teachers did not understand how theories influenced what or how they taught lessons within the classrooms or how their current practices could have been tied to various educational theories. Rather than theory, time during their PLCs was spent on learning the curriculum, sharing lessons, and creating assessments, but specific discussion of educational theory was absent.

Because the participants did not identify any traditional educational theories within their discussions or interview, the researcher identified topics that investigated theoretical debates or discussions to answer this research question. The participants of this study referred to debates they engaged in during their PLC meetings as theory, and therefore the researcher used this same definition: the most common debates over educational theory included textbook usage versus multiple resources along with memorization versus experiential learning. Additional theoretical and methodological discussions present in PLCs and evident during classroom observations were incorporating cooperative learning, integrating interdisciplinary teaching, and encouraging students to connect their knowledge to the outside world. The participants gained insight on educational ideas and methodology because of the PLC.
Textbook vs. Multiple Resources

In a situation where teachers were learning new content, many teachers felt it was most comfortable to lean on the textbook for support. All three of the teachers interviewed noted multiple times that “a lot of people were pulling to the textbook, because it’s a comfortable crutch that’s there. There’s printed material. You can read it, answer questions. [But] our curriculum is so not textbook-based” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). John Brown reflected on the debate over textbook usage by saying, “I understand that for somebody who is teaching it just one section. I’m just going to drift back into what the book tells me to do. [However, the] book is just one resource” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). He felt it was one perspective and provided a curriculum that was inconsistent with the districts targets as well as being simply outdated. John Brown noted this when saying,

> With our curriculum, a book that’s set at a certain point in time doesn’t match up with what we need to be teaching about this ever-changing world, and things are constantly morphing. Some regions are very stable, and they tend to more or less stay the same, but there are other regions where it’s just a constant hot box of change. So, the book just cannot move with it. And you can’t blame the publisher for the world changing and then not being able to keep up with it, but it does create issues and like trying to talk about and trying to find those resources to talk about all those changes that have happened in the Middle East over this past year. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

As the facilitator, John Brown continued to push for the use of alternate perspectives and resources: “[We should be] pulling in other resources whether it’s film clips from [online sources], articles from [magazines], or role playing simulations” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011).
While some people had taken advantage of the great amounts of videos, digital slide shows, links, and ideas offered to all of the seventh-grade geography teachers, others felt more comfortable relying on the textbook. While a myriad of resources were shared during each PLC, Barbara Jones did feel more comfortable relying on the book. She remembers being told, “You shouldn’t [solely] use the book, and I’m like, ‘Yea, but I don’t even know it. I don’t even know how to depart from the book’” (Interview 2, December 7, 2011). She greatly appreciated the materials shared but felt overwhelmed by emails and the district’s SharePoint site: “My biggest challenge is I can never find the bloody documents online. That’s not them, that’s me” (Interview 2, December 7, 2011). She did not have the same comfort level with technology as the other teachers, such as Brown or Smith, and described herself as “not computer friendly.”

Therefore, she justified her use of the textbook by saying, “The text is helpful. Kids don’t mind using the text. [But] they said, ‘you really just need to use the internet and not the book’, and I said, ‘that’s a great idea. I don’t have the time’” (B. Jones, Interview 1, November 15, 2011). The researcher observed these tendencies within Barbara Jones’s classroom, in which the book was used in five out of the six observations. Students had assignments, such as “Read Chapter 12.2 and complete the terms, questions, and quiz at the end” (Observation 3, December 7, 2011).

Multiple resources. Barbara Jones acknowledged her reliance on the textbook, but she also acknowledged her desire to go beyond a one-sided view of history. She described how daunting finding resources could be:

Education now is in a real tipping point because the access to information is so fabulous on the internet. You can get primary sources now. You can listen to people talk about the EU...who has time to sift through those? [John Brown] does a great job. He sends out links all the time. (Interview 1, November 15, 2011)
As the observations progressed, she coupled use of the textbook with additional resources she obtained access to during various PLC meetings. During the January 20 observation, the researcher noted that two videos on the Aral Sea were used, along with a PowerPoint the researcher had previously seen in John Brown’s classroom.

Barbara Jones appreciated the effort of veteran teachers to link resources under each target and noted this document as one of the best outcomes of the PLC experience: “[John Brown] and [Sue Smith] went through our targets and wrote down where we would find YouTube videos or PowerPoints or resources. That was really helpful” (B. Jones, Interview 3, January 25, 2012). When targets, multiple resources, and activities were provided and shared, the teachers within the PLC engaged in discussions surrounding teaching strategies. This shift in theory, from using one resource to incorporating many perspectives and resources, was noted by the observer. For example, when discussing what to teach about the European Union on November 22nd, the PLC members discussed a Smartboard lesson on the EU that had been shared on SharePoint: “Oh I did that one too” responded three members of the PLC. It was a lesson based on information gathered from one site, in which interactive slides were created by John Brown. He stated, “I did the advantages and disadvantages as a small group first and then had kids drag and drop the ideas when they understood it more.” Another teacher added, “My kids just went right into it after listening to the audio. I felt like some of it was too long for them.” A different teacher shared her different approach to instruction: “I printed it out and was going to have kids annotate different sections of the article.” Sue Smith continued to facilitate the discussion by asking, “Should we talk about what portions of the article we should share with the kids and what we want them to know?” One teacher inquired back, “Should kids decide on what
is most important? Should we let them figure it all out?” While some teachers wanted to let students know specific details about the content; others wanted students to discover the most important information for themselves. When teachers were less-familiar with the content, they sought more clarity and desired specific answers. However, they all had something in common: they were now all using additional perspectives of a topic, utilizing additional resources beyond the textbook.

**Levels of Thinking**

As a PLC, self-directed and experiential learning was a focus. John Brown shared that PLCs have helped him question his teaching methods:

> Before it would have just been, ‘here’s what I’m going to tell you now. I’m going to tell you why the assembly line is good.’ [Now] I let them figure it out... [how] assembly lines increase competition between businesses…I also have them get together and talk about it. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

As a result of the PLCs, more thinking is done regarding the methods behind lessons. Teachers admit that hearing what other teachers are doing encourages them within their classrooms:

> I think a lot of us try to have interactive activities, ones where they’re exchanging ideas, debates, even experiments with economy and population. Those are things we’ve shared. But I know that there are others that are comfortable with the textbook or with the worksheet. So some of that depends on teacher style I think too. (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

These levels of higher learning were also encouraged through the interdisciplinary teaching in which students were encouraged to make connections with varying concepts.

When reflecting about his lesson on converting currencies of the European Union, John Brown preferred pushing students to higher levels of thinking: “If you just said to them, ‘either read or take notes’, they’re very diligent about doing what they’re told, but they don’t retain any
[information]” (Post-Observation Interview 1, November 15, 2011). His theory regarding note-taking and memorization could also have to do with his many years teaching the subject, and therefore, he simply had more time to experiment with various educational theories in the classroom. After observing a lesson on the impact of the Euro on the European Union, John Brown noted,

They need almost need to experience something before they grasp it. For them to have the frustration...and multiplying random numbers, and not understanding how or why a connection occurs. I want them to experience it and understand it. The kids have a hard time retaining anything, so I know if they are annoyed and frustrated and confused, there’s a chance they’ll remember this like a week from now. (Post-Observation Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

Sue Smith also encouraged students to make predictions about links between world events after utilizing experiential learning earlier in the unit. After learning about World War I, “the [students] were able to tell me yesterday about the effects and what future problems they foresaw. Once they did that, they were predicting the causes of World War II” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011).

Questioning was frequently used to encourage higher level thinking in students. John Brown used questioning frequently during classroom observations, during which he asked students to observe ways countries were coping with overpopulation in China: “Where is the money going when you buy shoes? Who makes that money? What problems will [the workers] have? Why are people moving away from villages to the cities?” (Interview 3, January 24, 2012). Students were then shown videos, presented an article, and given time in class to develop their own ‘recommendations’ for how to solve various population issues in Asia. Students were highly engaged, as shown by on-task conversations and varied answers to the posed questions when sharing out to the class. Sue Smith had similar tactics of questioning and higher-level thinking
expectations within her classroom. She chose to use the jigsaw strategy of teaching in her classroom, in which students learned about one piece of information and then shared in small groups:

    Just knowing and being familiar with the jigsaw activity, you could say that to an experienced teacher, and they’d know. But someone who’s new to teaching, you have to teach them about that strategy [and the content] so sometimes those conversations go different ways. (Post-Observation Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

When asked about sharing many of these higher-level thinking activities within PLCs, Sue Smith shared:

    [I] passed it along and pointed it out to people that it’s there...but the hardest part is our size [and] there’s so much to do. Should we do an assessment? Should we define the targets? Then there wasn’t time to share an actual lesson. (Post-Observation Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

This lack of time to share in-depth lessons, along with having to go back to basics because of less-experienced colleagues, was a common theme noted by the researcher and seemed to impact the amount of theory shared within the seventh-grade social studies PLC.

Cooperative Learning

    Within each PLC meeting, teachers encouraged varying forms of student grouping and cooperative learning. When lessons topics were shared, teachers gave each other ideas as to how students could work together to accomplish tasks. Sue Smith reflected on group work by saying,

    I always have an interactive piece. It always comes back to discussion, because they’re inspired, they’re excited, they’re angry, they’re frustrated, or they want to debate. I like that. It feels like sometimes I even do more interactive strategies in social science then I do in language arts….The large group discussions end up moving the class. (Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011)
The teachers frequently shared discussion questions or Socratic topics during PLC meetings, such as “Should the United Kingdom leave the European Union?” and “What is the impact of Asia’s population”?

The emphasis on cooperative learning was encouraged by building administration during teacher institute days: “In the last few years we did get some instruction on cooperative learning, which I think brought people back just to get some fresh ideas and strategies more than anything” (S. Smith, Interview 3, January 24, 2012). John Brown also recalled,

We’ve done work with Kagan Structures last year and the year before, a little bit during our institutes. I know the big thing was the importance of partner sharing, so I have reconfigured my room now so they’re in clumps of two. That way they have built-in partners to discuss things with. (J. Brown, Post-Observation Interview 5, January 12, 2012)

Barbara Jones shared a strategy of cooperative grouping during one PLC meeting as well:

I just have them work in tables on their maps and on their projects. They do really well [and] they can also go and check others’ [work],.. I just try to give them different style of attacking the project and they decide. (Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

The three observed teachers all seemed to feel that classroom interaction greatly impacts the way students retain knowledge. As Sue Smith noted, “Cooperative learning [provides] them a chance to draw conclusions and do some deductive reasoning...they were able to talk to one another and I did have to stop and model to one group and prompt another, but it did allow me to go over to these groups and work with them a little bit more” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011).

Through the PLC discussions that included asking questions of one another, such as “What best instructional methods will lead to be best student learning?”, the teachers within this middle school PLC felt that cooperative learning was the answer (PLC Observation 6, January 24, 2012). By discussing ways that teachers can group students during classroom activities and gain
strategies as part of these discussions, members of this geography PLC were able to improve their practice.

Interdisciplinary Ideas

Because the social studies department was made up of teachers with a variety of other teaching areas, a common focus of PLC meeting time was the use of interdisciplinary teaching. By trying to find ways to integrate various types of content and subject areas, teachers who might feel uncomfortable with one topic could bring in their area of expertise to better their background knowledge.

**Integrating science.** Within the PLC, many overlaps were found between the district science and social studies curriculum. For example, Sue Smith noted,

> We’ve discovered that we have science teachers teaching both science and social science, which is not uncommon, but it’s the first time that we’ve been able to discuss that there’s a crossover in the curriculum between them. And [we’ve] learned] the climates and the terms are different, and the kids are learning about it at the same time” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

The discussions regarding curriculum topics that spanned a couple of subject areas allowed teachers to not only find a common ground for teaching, but it also allowed for clarification for the students. In science, the various climates were referred to as “biomes,” while in social studies they are “climates” with varying names. “Those are the good things that have come from [the discussions]. It creates some frustration, but then ultimately really important discoveries” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011).

**Integrating math.** Math integration was another topic frequently addressed within the PLC. One activity shared within the PLC was known as “Backpacking through Europe” in which
students researched a country with a partner and developed a poster identifying major features of the country. Students then “backpacked” around Europe, learning about various regions and in particular, noting the differences between Eastern and Western Europe. More specifically,

Kids are taking notes as they go around and then they have to complete a Venn diagram at the end of what [they observed] about the differences between Eastern and Western Europe. Either culturally, or the land, the physical features, the politics, those kinds of things. Last year [Bob] did math conversations with the Euro, so they had to switch their money before they could go in. (S. Smith, Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011)

By bringing in their specialty area and collaborating with colleagues with other strengths, students were able to benefit from interdisciplinary teaching.

Integrating language arts. Teachers who have taught reading and writing, known as language arts in the middle school, may not have the same geographic expertise as some of the other social studies teachers. However, they were able to utilize their love of books to engage students. Barbara Jones noted,

Last year I had kids that were from different parts of the world, so we would talk about it. Then we did our multicultural novel unit; the kids covered a lot of books that dealt with China, Japan, so in language arts they are covering some other things they are tying into [geography]. When we did our projects in language arts he said, ‘We should do this in social studies. This would be really cool.’ So I’m thinking of… [letting] every kid do a country and here are the targets. (B. Jones, Interview 3, January 25, 2012)

This unit was shared within the language arts PLC, so not all social studies teacher had been exposed to this idea. The use of historical fiction and nonfiction books also came into play when the school’s administration was looking for additional ways to provide reading support. Barbara Jones shared,

Some of our resource kids are really low readers, [so] they’re in a separate geography class where they do nonfiction or historical fiction books. So they learn all the targets through [reading books] …We did a lot of searching and trying to find ones that tied in with the targets; so far so good. (Interview 3, January 25, 2012)
By providing teachers with interdisciplinary ideas in PLC meetings, teachers without extensive social studies background could help their students with learning the targets through books, projects, and connections.

**World Concept**

Throughout the interviews and observations, the observer noted that in addition to the importance of interdisciplinary integration, the idea of a world concept kept returning. Teachers within their classrooms, PLC meetings, and interviews spoke frequently of the desire for their students, who typically come from middle or upper middle-class families, to understand the world. Sue Smith noted, “One of my biggest goals for social science is that the kids see that the world is bigger than them. It’s an egotistical age and it should be. They are egocentric” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Sue Smith noted that students were able to understand quickly that they had a lot to learn about the world around them, and she enjoyed watching their understanding of the world grow:

They begin to realize that the world is bigger than you. And just bigger [than] the Chicago area. Bigger than the United States. I love that by the end of the year; they start to feel that things are unjust, and things are unfair, and they can discuss that intelligently. They can discuss it with some intellect. I also tell them that I want them to be able to sit at a table with adults who are speaking about what just happened with Israel and Palestine. I want them to be able to throw something in, [and show] they know what they’re talking about. They’re probably going to be smarter than a lot of kids that are on J-Walk on Jay Leno. Because they can identify some basic things and know where some things are. I think more than the nitpicky, it’s just the global concepts of appreciating the world around us and things they need to consider and know as the world becomes more global. (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)
The teachers found that because social studies did not seem to be a priority in prior years of schooling, students typically did not have a passion for social studies. However, all three teachers excitedly talked about moments when they were able to see a change in their students’ perspectives. This change was noted by John Brown, as his students developed a change in attitude for the subject first and the world concept seemed to follow. He noted:

My personal goal is to try and find a way to get them to actually care enough about themselves and this content that they want to do well at it...If you were to ask them at the beginning of the year where they would rank Social Studies [as a subject], most of them would have it pretty far down their list. But by the end of the year..., it is relevant to their lives and when you tell them that ‘a lot of you are going to have jobs or you are traveling all over the world or working with people all over the world’, it does actually make them realize. One of those first assignments that we do is go home and find two things that are made in the United States in your house and they can’t. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

To encourage students to develop a greater world concept, the teachers integrated multiple perspectives within lessons. These lessons were brainstormed and shared in three PLC meetings, according to the observer’s notes, and the observer saw lessons from all three teachers that had students thinking about varying perspectives of the same issue. For example, John Brown had students engaged in an activity in which they were looking at the existence and membership of the European Union from many angles: “Here is your perspective. Read about it. Figure out what this person believes, why they believe it, how their life is being impacted by the [European Union]. Then have a discussion with people who have a whole different point of view” (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 22, 2011). He later reflected,

What am I hoping they get out of it? An understanding of the different points of view that are existing in Europe right now [and] not everyone is wholeheartedly in support of the [European Union]. [This activity] gave them a chance to hear different perspectives...but there’s only one perspective from the textbook. (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 22, 2011)
The teachers also found a way to connect global concepts to ideas closer to students’ lives. When teaching about the disappearing Aral Sea, John Brown had students discuss hypotheticals in relation to the Great Lakes:

[It] helps to have some kind of connection to [students]. Otherwise, it’s a sea they’ve never really heard of in countries that they haven’t ever heard of. To have them actually be able to make that connection [helps] them see how it could affect their lives. It [makes] it high interest, and I love doing that. Once they actually see what’s going on, they’re fascinated by it. (J. Brown, Post-Observation Interview 4, December 20, 2011)

Barbara Jones had a student who frequently travels to Europe share stories with the class:

They love having him share, and he brought in all these coins from all these different countries” (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 29, 2011). Barbara Jones offered extra credit each week to go home and ask questions of their parents to drum up interest in topics or regions they were discussing in class. One such example included,

‘Ask your parents what they would think of going on a vacation to Monaco?’ They came back with the funniest answers: ‘That’s a pretty ritzy place to go. I’d love to do all the gambling, but we sure wouldn’t be able to stay there for very long. We don’t have enough money’. It just gave kids different perspectives. (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 29, 2011)

This particular social studies PLC emphasized and encouraged students to develop a better world understanding by investigating and comparing various perspectives. Because it was emphasized during the PLC meetings, each teacher took time to ensure the conversations regarding perspectives were included within classroom instruction. Furthermore, the theoretical debates and discussions including textbook utilization versus multiple resources, encouraging higher levels of thinking, incorporating cooperative learning, and tying interdisciplinary units all provided teachers with a framework for positive practices within their classrooms. While some discussion were intense and heated, all participating teachers noted that because of these
conversations, they were more deliberate and purposeful in their classroom lessons and activities, making an effort to improve their teaching and educational practices.

**Research Question 3: Creating and Evaluating Common Lessons**

The third research question (How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?) investigated the connection between activities shared in one middle school PLC and lessons implemented in the classroom environment.

Within the weekly PLC meetings, the observer noted many different types of shared instructional activities. All teachers were seemingly willing to share what they were working on in the classroom, and all three teachers observed that without the weekly meeting time, regular activities would not have been shared. The observer noted a couple of common themes: teachers used many similar activities when ideas were shared in PLC meetings. Out of all of those shared, the most commonly used ones focused on higher level thinking with maps and integrating reading strategies.

**Common Activities**

Within the weekly PLC time, the teachers had multiple opportunities to share lessons or ask for different ways of teaching the learning targets. While incorporating others’ activities and lessons was not mandated, John Brown, Sue Smith, and Barbara Jones all were excited at the opportunity to share.
Sharing common activities seemed to be teachers’ most engaged time within their PLC.

Sue Smith explained:

Education in general is so isolating that this forces cooperative opportunities. [PLCs are] collaboration that’s scheduled for you. I think interdisciplinary teams might have been designed that way, but you end up there talking about kids and activities and moving through an agenda where this is more so really focusing on talking about content. So, while today’s PLC [we were able to] talk about how we would prepare for that. Otherwise it’s a pass in the hallway; somebody has to be on your team or close by…you don’t get to talk to other people. I think the biggest success [is] just being able to share ideas. (S. Smith, Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

The observer noted this sharing occurring at every PLC meeting. For example, Barbara Jones shared one sample of a success with her PLC when she noted,

My kids just didn’t get the whole Industrial Revolution to Cold War timeline... [In PLC, the teachers said] ‘Use this worksheet. I’ve used this’. And they shoot us something in an email...So at PLC [today] I said, ‘The kids can do this!’ I then felt really comfortable [with those targets]. (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

John Brown communicated a similar sentiment when it came to sharing activities that involved simplifying complex material for students:

We’ve been really good about sharing things about different government, climate, [and] economic systems. You see other kids on other teams walking around with it in the hall. And you’re like, ‘Oh, good, they’re using the same, the same thing there’. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

All 10 teachers in the PLC contributed lessons or ideas at some point during the observation period. As the facilitator, John Brown as acutely aware of others’ participation and was eager to incorporate new ideas:

It was great that in our meeting this morning, [one teacher] was able to share the thing that he and I had done with the newspapers...because I would have never come up with it. And then [another teacher] said we have all these [magazines], [and we could] find a story about the Middle East from each decade when we get to that. Because we cooperate a lot more it’s more likely that these things are going to happen on a regular basis. Where we’ll actually be able to share something that we did that worked really well, [and] for our building, I think it’s what we need. (Interview 2, December 6, 2011)
The teachers were able to examine resources with one another as well as admit when they felt students needed more support. For example, at the December 6 meeting, Barbara Jones shared a target her students were having a hard time grasping. While she tried one activity shared by a PLC member, Barbara Jones still did not feel her students learned the material. Sue Smith and the other teachers stepped in to offer many alternative suggestions, and Sue Smith later reflected:

> Today that’s one of the first times that we really talked specifically about one common activity that helps students and whether we would do it or not. I think part of [Barbara Jones’s] comment is that then she feels, ‘How do I do that? I’ve done that before. And so now what else do I do?’ (Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

Because of this PLC time built into the day, this conversation was able to happen, and Barbara Jones was offered a myriad of new ideas for teaching that learning target.

While most teachers were willing to share and/or vocalize their issues, the veteran social studies teachers took it upon themselves to provide as many activities, lessons, and resources as possible to those with fewer years of experience. Sue Smith was one such teacher:

> You really have to do a lot of studying and researching, I think, to teach this course. And again that’s where that PLC just is a great tool, because then you help one another. The other thing that we did is we brought in the student target sheets, and I included every resource that was available for every target, every video clip. Just underneath [each target], in a different color there’s this document we have: this PowerPoint, We have this link. Use this website. It was a lot [of time]. (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

John Brown readily shared any and all activities he did in the social studies classroom. While this did not always go over well and sometimes left the teachers feeling overwhelmed, he still felt like it was beneficial to share because there was no other time within the day:

> I’ll definitely share it with anybody because it gets them thinking about the [learning targets] in a different way...and I think that for at least half the people in [the PLC], they will be like, ‘yep, yep, I will absolutely turn around and use this. And if you’re telling me it’s good, I’ll use it. (Post-Observation Interview 1, November 15, 2011)
Common lessons and activities were observed frequently by the researcher, and even if they were implemented in varying ways in the classroom, the teachers found benefits in sharing their ideas.

**Higher Level Thinking with Maps**

While all observed teachers incorporated various types of cooperative learning in their classrooms, they also concurred that when mapping, students should be engaged with higher level thinking activities. The observer noted continuous push-back on the idea of labeling and coloring regional maps, along with a discouraging tone regarding simple memorization. This common-place practice in the geography classroom seemed to be discouraged by veteran social studies teachers, and PLC discussions took place about how to engage students with maps and map-reading. John Brown noted, “I’m trying to require [students] to actually go back and look at pictures and maps, to get some information. It is so important for them [to] interpret the maps, graphs, and charts...not just the text, but the visuals there as well” (Post-Observation Interview 5, January 12, 2012). These PLC discussions proved to be impactful and resulted in each teacher integrating and utilizing these mapping activities within their classroom.

**Beyond memorization.** While only one observed teacher felt map memorization was important, all found value in higher level thinking with maps. One particular program utilized by this district, in which teachers have the opportunity to choose varying levels of mapping activities, asks students to draw conclusions after looking at various statistics on maps. This program was referenced at all six PLC meetings where the observer was present, and specific reference was made to those activities that encouraged higher levels of thinking. At the meeting
on November 1, 2011, 14 minutes of the PLC time was used for discussion of this interactive mapping program. Sue Smith shared during one PLC meeting: “I think the best thing to do is create stations around your room with these maps. All the materials are on [our school’s] SharePoint site” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). She went on further to explain the different types of activities as well as encourage the higher-level thinking activities: “Activities one and two go over basic geography skills, while two through five provide more extension.” John Brown noted, “After doing two days of these maps, they are able to really understand statistical information and these maps” (PLC observation, November 1, 2011). As a veteran teacher with this mapping tool, John Brown and Sue Smith spent most of the time teaching their PLC how it all works: “The materials on SharePoint can be overwhelming... Please let [John Brown] or I know if we can help you curtail any confusion” (PLC observation, November 1, 2011). Then after showing the other PLC participants how the activities worked, John Brown walked teachers through find the resources on SharePoint step by step. He showed it on the projector while the teachers worked through it on their computers: “First you click on our school, next you click on social science” (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011).

The teachers then shared personal experiences using the maps, including the use of cooperative grouping to read maps: “I usually have kids work in partners, have them check with me, and then they can move to the next question.” Another participant noted:

I found I could Xerox the packet of 5 or 6 pages, and all the kids had all the questions. Groups shared the packet and the cards. They get one day to do one activity. It made it a lot easier setting up for me” (PLC Observation, November 1, 2011).

Most teachers had positive things to say, such as “The kids really like the activities.” While going through the directions, the teachers had interesting conversations in which they freely
talked back and forth about how to best use these higher-level thinking activities. One teacher asked,

Now let me ask you, you said you had kids use an atlas while doing it instead of the cards? Interesting. I’ve also had kids use the political and physical maps they create to answer the questions. I wanted to see what you guys thought about that. (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011)

The conversation progressed through other teachers providing input on modifications for resource students, adding suggestions of using Google Earth and sharing experiences using pictures to enhance the mapping activities (PLC Observation 1, November 1, 2011).

As the teachers were processing the activities, Sue Smith explained her personal experiences using the maps during the PLC on November 1, 2011:

Seeing that [mapping activity] today, I think that’s a great example of how you can take geography beyond just a map, just a pencil and paper activity, and make them start to make those upper level connections. It’s very difficult to do without lecturing and walking them through it, so the practice becomes their movement and their exchange of information and providing [students] with tools to make connections. (Interview 1)

When the researcher asked why so much time was spent on these interactive mapping activities, Sue Smith explained: They

require quite a bit of higher level thinking. For example, once students have become familiar with the various maps produced for each region, they are given three pictures. From these pictures, they must determine the latitude and longitude of the given area. This leads to both small group [and] large group discussions, [which] ends up really moving the class. (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 22, 2011)

John Brown concurred, saying the mapping activities “are just such a great resource that everyone is using that one some way, shape or form. So I love seeing that” (Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Instead of drawing and coloring maps, students were utilizing data to draw conclusions, and based on the PLC conversations, all students within the school were being exposed to these in-depth resources.
Mapping debates. While one target for each unit includes “accurately locate and identify places in the world” and “understanding geographic concepts”, this seventh grade PLC engaged in somewhat heated debates over the role of memorization in mapping. During the observed PLC on January 24, 2012, this debate ensued, leaving some feeling frustrated. John Brown reflected upon that saying, “Today I find myself frustrated, I’m angry, but such is life” (Interview 3, January 24, 2012). More specifically, it was a debate over an assessment on Asia regarding mapping the country. While some teachers felt it was important for students to know all of the countries in Asia, others disagreed. Sue Smith agreed to create the test, but after she did this, the PLC went through all of the countries in Asia and voted on which ones they thought should be a part of the test. Philosophical questions were posed, including “What is the actual point of geography?”, and they all agreed that students did need to understand and be able to identify certain geographical features (PLC Observation, January 24, 2012). The conversation did get heated at one point. Barbara Jones recalled,

I don’t mean to bad mouth [John Brown], but yesterday he goes, ‘I refuse to do this, I just don’t believe in it.’ And when he said that, I’m like, ‘Well, there goes that, you know, I won’t discuss it with someone that’s so adamant about not letting kids memorize where countries are.’...I think it helps them see where places are. Because conceptually at this age they can’t picture things.” (Interview 3, January 25, 2012)

This PLC meeting clearly left an impression on both teachers, in which they agreed to something within the meeting but later felt like compromise was not achieved: “I don’t have the same opinions on map reading as they do” (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012).

Ultimately, it was up to the individual teachers to decide how to reach the targets and what to require of their students. Barbara Jones felt it was important to understand where countries were to further understand their relationship with one another. “Why does Germany
invade Russia? Why Poland first? Why doesn’t France break down right away? Why doesn’t England give in? It makes sense when you see it on the map” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). To understand the countries, students needed to memorize where they were located. To help the students learn the countries, “I put [online mapping activities] on the Smartboard during Study Hall or something. My friend [Sue] made nice little worksheets for them to record their scores just to see” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). This tactic, along with mapmaking, helped Barbara Jones herself learn about the countries and relationships within Europe; “[before] it was just a mess of black lines for me [also]” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). She had the students complete maps for each unit, involving labeling landforms, resources, and coloring countries and bodies of water. She found this activity important for students to develop a general familiarity with the region: “If they color in class, I can go around and eyeball the kids that spatially have trouble” (Post-Observation Interview 5, December 20, 2011). The researcher noted that memorization of countries was mentioned in two of six classroom observations with Barbara Jones, yet the emphasis on knowing countries by heart was not observed in John Brown or Sue Smith’s classrooms.

Mapping activities. Even when teachers did not use the newer materials to ask students to draw conclusions from maps, they supplemented with more traditional ideas or resources. Teachers seemed reluctant to let go of previously held notions about geography, in that the main focus should be memorizing and creating maps. Some were comfortable with memorization, creating a mismatch with the higher level activities that were discussed weekly within the PLC meetings. The observer noted that that while Barbara Jones did use some of the interactive mapping, she also had students using higher level thinking with maps on other projects. Students
selected a European country and completed a project in which students “were to discover population, climate, EU status, basically looking at the development of the country…map out all of the elements and in a Socratic format, report back to the class [while other students] asked questions of them” (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 29, 2011). The observer noted that during this classroom observation, the students seemed to anticipate other students’ questions and, therefore, had drawn in-depth conclusions about how statistics and researched information impacted their country. Barbara Jones noted,

That was a project that came as a result of hearing what some of the other teachers did. One of the teachers developed a ‘backpacking trip’ and I didn’t think I was at a stage where I could devise that, so [we] put together this packet on Europe. (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 29, 2011)

Barbara Jones frequently noted that having weekly discussions with teachers pushed her to try new things and create interactive activities, even if they were not the same things completed by the other PLC teachers.

Reading Strategies

Drawing conclusions from maps, charts, data, and personal experiences was a major focus that tied into the School Improvement Plan, as was integrating reading strategies into content areas beyond language arts. While this is something all three teachers mentioned repeatedly and the observer saw each time she observed the PLCs, integrating reading strategies in the social studies classes was not something specifically encouraged by the administration. Instead, the PLC “looked at our School Improvement Plan and thought, ‘What is it that we in social science can actually do to do more’” ((J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012). In PLC meetings, team members discussed integrating different reading strategies into social studies:
We had a talk last Thursday at our Department meeting about things like QAR [Question Answer Relationship], pre-reading strategies, post-reading strategies, book noting…we’re helping the language arts curriculum and in essence helping our [standardized test] scores by developing different strategies, but at the same point in time, we’re still delivering our curriculum in a meaningful way. (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

The teachers saw the need to support reading strategies, particularly those who taught both language arts and social studies: “We’ve been practicing some reading strategies with nonfiction articles as well as getting the content” (B. Jones, Interview 1, November 15, 2011).

Barbara Jones used her language arts background to enhance resources provided by John Brown: “I bet all this stuff came from [John Brown]; he’s really good about sending out what he finds. He’s like a Rolodex of [resources]” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). In the particular case, however, John Brown acknowledged that all of the initiatives can be overwhelming, even to the most seasoned teachers:

It’s such a delicate balance…we’ve got this curriculum that we don’t have enough time to teach as it is. And now if all of a sudden now if I’m being asked to add in, you know, do some bell ringer activities, you’re going to be doing some data interpretation and teach them how to do QAR or teach them how to do book noting. It does become stressful, and I’m somebody who buys into it and absolutely believes it, and I’m stressed out by it. So, I can only imagine somebody who doesn’t necessarily see the benefit of it and sees Language Arts as Language Arts and Social Science as Social Science and Science as Science and Math as Math. I can see them having a real struggle with trying to integrate that in. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Despite being pulled in many directions, deciphering complex textbook passages was something all teachers found a need to encourage. Barbara Jones justified her continued and frequent use of the textbook because of her ability to integrate reading strategies when reading the challenging nonfiction text. She noted, “They don’t want to read the book. That seems to get them ready for college and high school. How do you read a book? How do you use the
textbook?” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011). She expanded, sharing how she encourages reading strategies in her classroom:

When we start a chapter, we look at pictures, we read the captions, we talk about what’s in the image and [if] there are any comparisons that you can make to this image between levels. And [in PLCs] we talk about how to read the heading and the questions first, but I haven’t done as much of that as I would like. (Interview 2, December 7, 2011)

John Brown noted that within their PLCs, they emphasize “the importance of taking 90 seconds to look at section titles. Look at the pictures, the graphs, the charts.” He went on to discuss the importance of teaching students clues within their reading along with writing in margins or using post-it notes to annotate their thoughts (Interview 3, January 24, 2012).

John Brown often relied on more experienced language arts teachers to give him suggestions, as both Sue Smith and Barbara Jones did frequently. Barbara Jones also shared that many topics in their language arts PLC carry over to the conversations in their social studies PLC: “In social studies [PLC], I believe we hit on talk, using the text, and using nonfiction articles. There are... four of the language arts teachers who are teaching social studies as well” (B. Jones, Interview 2, December 7, 2011). While John Brown acknowledged that students can gain some information from the text, he also wanted to ensure the textbook was not just handed to the students:

I’m hoping that we’re seeing more of like cooperative groupings where it’s kids working with each other on the readings, whether it’s from the textbook or it’s from an article or whatever, rather than it being like take the book home, read this section, come back tomorrow with the questions at the end answered. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

Beyond the textbook, the teachers used PLC time to bring in additional resources to support reading comprehension. During the November 11 PLC Meeting, reading strategies were encouraged by bringing in Dr. Seuss’s Butter Battle Book to teach the Cold War. Students were
to make connections regarding the building up of weapons in the book and compare the themes of Dr. Seuss to the United States and Soviet Union. During the meeting, the teachers agreed to share their personal resources and let the teachers know that the school library carried a copy as well. As with most of the collaboration that occurred during PLCs, the use of this book was a suggestion versus a mandate. Sue Smith advocated the use of bringing in fiction books and additional resources to enhance students reading comprehension: “I wanted [the students] to be able to make discoveries on their own, draw some of their own conclusions, either by pictures or by graphs or words, so they could determine what a cause and effect is” (S. Smith, Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011). This social studies PLC took the time to discuss reading strategies along with classroom implementation, providing new ideas for all 10 participants.

Conclusion

This research study provides insight regarding how these middle school teachers used information gained within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to change or modify their classroom instruction. School and district mandates, educational theories, and classroom activities were discussed at length in these meetings, and evidence of these discussions were present during classroom observations and teacher interviews. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the study, a discussion of the researcher’s findings, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Summary of the Research Study

This purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ perceptions and classroom integration of ideas shared within one middle school social studies Professional Learning Community (PLC). The researcher investigated how the types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influenced teachers to change their classroom practices, how teacher practices in the classroom are linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC, and how teacher practices in the classroom are linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC.

The professional development of teachers is essential to quality education, and collaboration of teachers within schools as a form of professional development is often overlooked but can provide teachers with new ideas and lead to improvement in students’ learning (DuFour, 2004). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with teachers who teach the same subject and grade level within the school day (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). This collaboration allowed them to “work together with the goals of expanding their knowledge and improving their craft” (Dimino, Taylor, & Morris, 2015). However, the effectiveness of PLCs can be limited depending on the
level and quality of implementation, as some schools take shortcuts and, therefore, produce no gains in student achievement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010).

Social studies professional development at the middle school level presents a particular challenge for school districts. Schools tend to focus on state and national mandates in the areas of reading writing, math, and science, while social studies is not given priority (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Hobbs & Moroz, 2001; Lintner, 2006). Because it does not tend to be a focus for districts, social studies teachers at the middle school level have more often been found to be teaching out of their area of expertise, and in some instances, as many as “52-91 percent of students in the social science subfields are taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in the main assignment field” (Thomas-Brown et al., 2016). Additionally, “the amount of geography instruction that students receive, the preparation of their teachers to teach geography, and the quality of instructional materials are inadequate to prepare students for the demands of the modern world” (Bednarz et al., 2013, p.7). However, Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) found that continued, sustained, and quality professional development for social studies teachers produced positive change in classroom instruction and student learning.

In this particular study at River Middle School, the professional development time came in the form of weekly social studies PLC meetings with teachers of the same subject and grade level. While secluded teachers often are less confident, resilient, or persistent, the teachers observed as part of this study were dedicated and committed to improving their practice (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). While they all felt discouraged about various aspects of the collaborative process and different points in the study, they all felt optimistic about the future possibilities PLCs offer: “There have been ideas shared and activities shared and more
cooperation between the teachers and the teams; it’s definitely been a positive step” (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012). These positive feelings toward collaboration parallel Dallas’s (2006) research in which the teachers also reported stronger teacher-relationships, effective collaboration, and greater implementation of curriculum reforms as a result of the formulation of PLCs. Graham (2007) found similar results in that if teachers had a common goal, their PLCs were able to establish a sense of community and were willing to deviate from previous teaching practices. Furthermore, McGee (2016) found that when teachers engaged in collaborative activities and discussions surrounding curriculum and student work, changes in teaching practices were observed. The teachers at River Middle School wanted to get the most out of PLCs, went into the meetings ready to learn and compromise, and completed the lessons shared within the PLC soon after the meetings. The data collected in this qualitative research study indicated that the PLC members found the time within their weekly meetings beneficial, and in turn, they implemented mandates, theories, and activities into their classrooms.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What types of discussions, mandates, or activities within one middle school social studies PLC influence teachers to change their classroom practices?

2. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to educational theories encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?

3. How are teacher practices in the classroom linked to instructional activities encouraged or discouraged within one middle school social studies PLC?
Discussion of the Findings

The teachers at River Middle School exhibited positive thoughts about change within social studies classrooms as a result of their PLC experiences. The teachers spent great amounts of time within the meetings learning the basic content of the subject matter, as many were new to the subject area. This idea contrasts with Chiodo and Byford’s (2004) study that found when teachers do not have the content knowledge, a variety of lesson plans, and an enthusiasm about the subject, student learning of social studies and their enjoyment of the subject suffers. Because the teachers spent their PLC time gaining knowledge and sharing lessons about the subject of social studies as well as reporting positive feelings about this time for collaboration, the future of social studies looks bright in this particular school. Educators who are excited can bring excitement to the entire staff: “A small group of educators within a school who are enthusiastic about a particular innovation can ‘infect’ an entire staff with that enthusiasm” (Marzano et al., 2001, p. 158). While the barrier to break down walls of communication took time, collaboration made even the most experienced teachers understand that they could always improve their craft:

I don’t know as much as I think I know, and I can always learn more. For a long time I think I was really stubborn [that] it had to be my way, because my way is the best way. Whereas now I’m far more willing to listen to what somebody else has to say, and see the value in it and think, ‘Okay, that’s something that I could or should be doing.’” (J. Brown, Interview 6, January 24, 2012)

John Brown went on to say that no matter the experience teaching social studies, “you’re getting a chance to collaborate and work on things. I definitely think it’s going to improve your classroom instruction and what you’re doing in the classroom” (Interview 6, January 24, 2012).
By further breaking down the teachers’ experiences with mandates, theory, and shared practice, it is clear that this PLC provided a positive professional development experience that further influenced many lessons taught in their classrooms. PLCs have the power to transform teaching practices when teachers have positive feelings about collaborative time, are given decision-making power, and focus on instruction (Dallas, 2006; Graham, 2007).

1. Influence through Discussions, Mandates, and Activities

To understand whether the use of PLCs is meaningful for teachers within their classrooms, the researcher looked at the types of discussions, mandates, or activities encouraged in the PLC that might influence teachers to change their classroom practices. Learning the district’s targets, developing formative assessments, deciphering district assessments, and analyzing the data from those assessments were common themes found in the PLC meetings, interviews, and in teacher classrooms.

District Expectations

In any school, it is important to have a viable curriculum in which teachers have a common understanding regarding the essential learning (Marzano, 2001). With social studies, this expectation is hard to achieve because of the ever changing curriculum, new district targets, and varied levels of knowledge among the PLC participants. The teachers at River Middle School did not have this luxury of a common understanding of the curriculum, and just because teachers are exposed to curriculum does not mean they will change practices in their classrooms (Guskey, 2000). While learning district social studies targets was brought up at every observed
PLC meeting, the fact that the teachers had some sort of guidance from the district allowed them to feel as if they were on the right track. Sue Smith agreed that the targets attempted to unify the varied experiences of the teachers:

I think [the PLC’s] purpose overall [is to] work together to be sure that the curriculum is unified in a way that we can see the targets in which our students are successful and the ones win which we need to either change our instruction [or] improve our instruction. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

The increased comfort level acknowledged by the PLC participants was consistent with research in which teachers thrive when provided with clear and quality teacher development. More specifically, in a study completed by Thomas-Brown et al. (2016),

Intensive, sustained, and content specific” professional development was provided for teachers with a social studies focus, and teachers “felt more confident and competent in teaching social studies content, utilized provided resources to enhance and extend instruction, and developed a sense of community amongst each other. (p. 69)

Guidance and learning specific concepts during the PLC time allowed the teachers to move beyond the basics while providing teachers with a wide variety of teaching options.

“Loose but tight” leadership was provided by the building administration, in that they asked the PLCs to create various formative assessments each trimester, similar to those ideas encouraged by DuFour (2007a). DuFour suggested that “this leadership approach fosters autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and parameters (tight)” (p. 39). Additionally, the PLCs were required to meet once a week and were asked to share leadership of the PLC. However, shared leadership with a group of teachers who knew very little about the subject presented many challenges:

The lack of a specific leader in the PLCs sometimes makes it more of a challenge. We were told very specifically not to have the department head or a team leader take control of PLC, [but] that it needs to be shared leadership. I just don’t know that I always agree with that. (J. Brown, Interview 6, January 24, 2012)
John Brown’s concern regarding shared leadership was valid, as teacher leadership relies on “the importance of having expertise in instructional practice as a mechanism to enhance student achievement” (Wilson, 2016, p. 47). When teachers do not have the expertise in the content area, they are less likely to experiment, try out new ideas, and go beyond the realms of the textbook. Teachers may have to abandon their old ways of teaching for more up-to-date engaging activities, causing internal conflict within the teachers (Cohen, 1990).

Beyond shared leadership, the teachers felt as if they were breaking the rules by learning content and sharing lessons. John Brown reflected: “If we’re given the freedom to go ahead and run this PLC as we need to, I think we can do some pretty great things” (Post-Observation Interview 2, November 22, 2011). The teachers continued to bring up comments like, “as long as we can get away with it” or “if we don’t get into trouble” when it came to simply sharing lessons (J. Brown, Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011). The sharing of lessons that occurred during these meeting was vital because when professional development activities focus solely on transfer of knowledge, few ideas are actually transferred into classroom practice. Teachers “needed to know how to deliver the material as well as how to better engage their students in classroom activities” (Diem et al., 2003, p. 6). Content cannot be taught without application and the inclusion of higher order thinking skills because it does not adequately develop teachers’ ideas, values, and perspectives (Bolinger & Warren, 2007).

The district and administrative expectations of the PLC proved to be daunting given the lack of teacher knowledge in the subject of geography. Looser requirements might have enabled the PLC to move forward based on their own discretion, while the specific guidelines served as checkmarks or something to check off a list so the true learning could begin. More work fell
upon the teachers with more experience, even though leadership shifted, due to the sheer fact that many teachers had a lesser understanding of the curriculum. However, despite drawbacks of administrative mandates, teacher still reported positive feelings about their classroom practices and overall ability to deliver the geography curriculum.

Assessments

Creating and reviewing data from assessments was a goal for the PLC, as encouraged by the administration. This is best practice, encouraged by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010), is “one of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning...to help a group of students acquire agreed-upon knowledge and skill” (p. 75). The PLC worked hard to develop these assessments but ran into roadblocks due to the lack of an agreed-upon knowledge and skills, as some teachers simply did not know the content. John Brown reflected on their attempts by saying,

It’s so hard to try to create an assessment if we’re all teaching different things. If you’ve got ten different people teaching the European Unit in ten different ways, I don’t think there’s any assessment that’s going to be really all that valuable. But I think if we can actually work on our instruction and then develop an assessment from there...I think for us that’s kind of what we need to do right now. (Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

The “loose-but-tight” leadership of the administration allowed the PLC to create an assessment in any manner it chose. The administration also did not require specific deadlines but rather requested progress reports. This coincides with the ideas of Stiggins (2002) in which various types of assessments of and for learning should be used to drive teacher instruction. Furthermore, the implementation of formative assessment creation parallel with DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, &
Karhanek’s (2010) definition of a PLC in that beyond meeting to collaborate and share ideas, assessments should play an influential role in learning and teaching (Stiggins et al., 2004).

Within the ideal PLC, same subject and grade-level teachers collaborated to develop common forms of assessment for each unit. They then administered this assessment to all students using the results of the assessment to further guide instruction for the teachers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). In the case of this particular geography PLC, assessments were created, but because teachers did not have background knowledge in the subject, assessments were not always quality or rigorous. This goes against the request from A road map for 21st century geography education: Assessment:

We need professionals with the necessary geography expertise and assessment development training and experience to develop effective assessment frameworks, items, and instruments for geography. We need educators who have been trained in the best practices for incorporating assessments and their results to inform teaching and learning in the classroom. (Edelson et al., 2013, p. 66)

These teachers have not been giving the training nor the expertise, and as a result the quality of the product dwindled. Ideally, these PLC-created assessment results should play a role in classroom instruction not only because of nationalized testing but because a large body of research highlights great gains in student achievement when instruction focuses on results (Fullan, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Stiggins, 2002).

The implementation of PLCs has greatly risen in popularity because of improved student test scores (Dallas, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Graham, 2007). However, these quantitative data are not necessarily effective in determining if teachers have changed their practice. When PLCs are too focused on assessments and data, especially when teachers do not have the common content or background knowledge, they have the potential to fail (Sims &
Penny, 2014). However, because this particular 7th grade geography PLC went ahead and fulfilled the requirements mandated by the administration, including the creation of multiple assessments, teachers were able to use remaining time to learn more geographical background knowledge and develop an understanding for the teaching targets. When teachers developed a better understanding of the content, they felt more confident in their implementation of the curriculum.

2. Educational Theories and Debates

While educational theory often makes up a substantial portion of teacher-education programs, theoretical discussions are often absent once teachers move into the reality of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2006a). Cheng, Cheng, and Tang (2010) similarly found that inconsistencies exist between theory and practice within the educational environment and that these connections should be modeled for them during their pre-service training. The current gap between theory and practice can create a dilemma in the classroom because, according to Higgs (2013), theory helps teachers propose solutions to a variety of problems and to critically reflect on best practices in the classrooms. Moore (2012) acknowledges educational theory is often an unpopular topic, as teachers feel that “pedagogical skill can be acquired, if at all, in the classroom, by watching more experienced teachers work and by using one’s common sense. Nothing more is needed” (p. 1). Moore contends that practicing teachers have even less enthusiasm for education theory as they often see it as a college subject that provides little application to the modern classroom. He also notes that the primary purpose of educational theory is to guide educational practice (Moore, 2012).
At River Middle School, theoretical conversations were not present in the traditional sense of the word. Named theorists were not discussed, nor were their ideas. When asked about theory, the teachers admitted, “I don’t know, I don’t remember theories. I’m so old, what are theories?” (B. Jones, Interview 3, January 25, 2012). Therefore, the researcher did not define theory according to the “great writers” but rather used Moore’s (2012) definition of theory: “A body of connected principles, counsels, and recommendations...which aims at guiding those engaged in educational activities, in schools and elsewhere” (p. 8).

The teachers’ lack of understanding regarding educational theory could have been because they lack theoretical conversations that dominate many undergraduate education programs, but each teacher observed had a Master’s Degree in some educational field. The lack of understanding of theory could also be attributed to the fact they are not talking about thoughtful rationale behind activities, but rather due to many time constraints, focused on simply sharing a lesson or resource they found. More realistically, the extreme demands placed on teachers, including changing curriculums every few years, teaching multiple in-depth subject areas, an increase in initiatives, and an overall level of exhaustion contributed to the teachers’ lack of theoretical knowledge. However, just because they did not know the names or terms of educational theorists does not mean their discussions regarding guiding principles or methodology were not related to theory. Discussions among the teachers within the PLC meetings focused on various ways to guide the teachers’ educational practices, so in this study, topics that guided varying educational practices were referred to as theory (Moore, 2012).

The discussions regarding guiding principles were heated at times, especially when it came to the topics of textbook usage versus multiple resources along with memorization versus
experiential learning. Because of their lack of content knowledge, some teachers within the PLC leaned on the textbook as the expert, too scared to deviate from the printed words. When students are not asked to critically think about material, teachers are also not faced with questions they may not be able to understand. It is easier and less time consuming to rely on the answer key from a textbook guided reading activity than it is to create a lesson that involves students analyzing and inquiring using varying primary sources. Cohen (1990) acknowledges that tension can arise as teachers explore their understanding of that knowledge and evaluate whether they have been successful, including the process of unlearning old theories they thought were solid and replacing these with new concepts and ideas. Teachers within this geography PLC showed they were open to new ideas, and the three teachers interviewed were all committed to better understanding the guiding principles that drove teachers’ lessons. While the engaged in debates, they showed a commitment to what they thought were best practices in teaching and social studies, even if they did not have research to back up their ideas.

Guiding principles or theories present in the PLC meetings and evident during classroom observations were incorporating cooperative learning, integrating interdisciplinary teaching and encouraging students to develop a better world concepts, thereby connecting their knowledge to the outside world. These guiding practices are more in-step with current research in social studies best practices, showing that teachers within this PLC did have a desire to teach quality social studies lessons and engage students in conversation, connections, and anticipating what role the student might have as a member of the larger global community.
Commitment to Theory and Change

Is the purpose of social studies citizenship transmission, or instead should social studies be teaching informed criticism and reform? Depending on the historical movement at the time or the teacher asked, this answer has varied greatly. One answer to this question is that teachers should constantly be planning activities and reinforcing curriculum that encourages “content knowledge, development of citizenship, active application of learning, and in-depth thinking” (Zemelman, et al., 2005, p. 174). Fullan (2005b) notes that new ideas can cause teachers to be resistant and create conflict. He advises that individuals should actually take time to listen to arguments due to the newly gained perspectives during the change process and warns that “smooth implementation is often a sign that not much is really changing” (p. 6).

The theoretical discussions taking place at weekly PLC meetings follow the ideas of Fullan (2006), who notes that when schools develop of a solid foundation, create collaborative teams, and focus on results, educational change can occur. Teachers must have commitment, and therefore when implementing PLCs, teachers should understand the purposes and theory behind its implementation as well as the decisions made within the group. Teachers have a moral commitment to helping students reach success, but they do not often know exactly how to create the best learning environment on their own (Fullan). While the teachers disagreed as to how best meet the needs of students at the time during their PLC discussions, they were attempting to create positive learning experiences for their students.

PLC implementation should also be taken into consideration when looking at how teachers responded to suggested changes in their classrooms. DuFour (2004) notes that often times with new initiatives, the following scenario plays out within education:
Initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. (DuFour, 2004)

In order to avoid this conventional educational cycle, DuFour (2004) suggests that PLCs should revisit the main purposes, functions, or theories behind PLCs to improve results of their collaboration. Within their PLC, the group should focus on student learning, including timely interventions, rather than just teaching, should continue to recognize the importance of a collaborative culture, and should use student results to guide their instruction (DuFour, 2004).

Within this 7th grade geography PLC, teachers heard great amounts of information regarding different teaching strategies or ways to engage students from fellow colleagues. They had potential to adapt their teaching based on the amount of information that was shared. In the cases of the three observed teachers, they chose to apply, change, think, and adapt, if a shared lesson or activity correlated with their personal ideals of teaching. However, it is ultimately up to teachers to determine what is actually taught during class (Thorton, 2005). While the potential to transfer practices was present during PLC meetings, teachers had to take that step and act on that new knowledge.

By looking at this theoretical change through the eyes of Fullan (2006) and DuFour (2004), it is encouraging that teachers were debating or conflicted over varying teacher practices and guiding principles. This means they were actually questioning their own practices and engaging in the process of collaboration and change. If the teachers had simply nodded their heads during a meeting, yet continued to use the same practices within their classrooms, it would show that change within the PLC was not taking effect. However, because all three of the observed teachers were engaging in discussions in their meetings, sharing out and modeling their
own best practices, trying out new ideas within their classrooms and self-reported their own struggles, yet also found great success within the PLC, change was observed.

**Textbook vs. Multiple Resources**

With so many educators teaching one period of social studies, the less experienced ones relied heavily on the textbook. Theoretical and methodological debates surrounding textbook usage were rampant within the PLC meetings, but some teachers simply did not have the background knowledge the National Geography Standards recommend, in that teachers should help students be “geographically informed through knowledge and mastery of three things: 1) factual knowledge; 2) mental maps and tools; 3) and ways of thinking” (Heffron & Downs, 2012, p. 7). When teachers are not informed about the field, it is difficult for them to share knowledge with students. Barbara Jones acknowledged,

I don’t have the background knowledge … [I] don’t have the answers. How do I know what the answers are? Those who made up the targets already kind of have a common knowledge, but now they’re spreading us and this content so thin” (Interview 1, November 15, 2011).

Most teachers within the PLC acknowledged that textbooks should not be the sole resource; however, with so much knowledge in the targets, some teachers were at a loss as to where to find information.

At the same time, most teachers, such as Sue Smith and John Brown, would have agreed with the findings the researchers Chiodo and Byford (2004), who found that eighth graders showed feelings of negativity and boredom toward social studies, commenting on the lectures, traditional textbook work, and worksheets. This boredom students felt in social studies was not the result of the subject matter but rather a result of the teacher’s instruction. Barbara Jones
remembered being told, “You shouldn’t [solely] use the book, and I’m like, ‘Yea, but I don’t even know it. I don’t even know how to depart from the book” (Post-Observation Interview 3, December 7, 2011). The feelings of the more experienced members of the PLC concurred with research in which rote automatic methods of instruction are less likely to meet the needs of students who need the most assistance and can cause students to become disengaged with learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hobbs & Moroz, 2001; Lintner, 2006; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985).

However, teachers needed to bring content into the classroom, and textbooks, along with lectures based on textbooks, are commonplace practice when it comes to the classroom (Mazur, 2009). Transfer of information from teacher to student is traditional yet ineffective, as students are not expected to think about the material presented and learning gains nearly triple when an approach focuses on students and interactive learning (Mazur, 2009). Therefore, the time debating this topic during PLCs and the movement away from the textbook was a conversation in which teachers and students potentially benefited.

The teachers found resources beyond the text, and the students were able to engage in resources that provided interest and a greater variety of perspectives: “I’d much rather [discuss] instruction. How are you going to get to this point with the kids and make sure they really understand it?” (PLC Observation, November 15, 2011). In this particular case, John Brown pointed back to the use of SharePoint and the common activities, which took the remainder of that particular PLC. Teachers were looking for specific lessons to teach tested content, and the observer noted great amounts of time were devoted to specific and detailed lessons surrounding such content. This time spent finding activities corresponds with Hess’s (2013) Cognitive Rigor
Matrix for Social Science/Humanities, Level 4 Extended Thinking, in which teachers should provide opportunities for students to “Analyze diverse/complex/abstract perspectives; Gather, analyze, and organize information from multiple sources; Analyze discourse styles/bias in speeches, legal briefs, etc. across time or authors” (Column 4, Row 4). Furthermore, when studying geography in particular, students should formulate questions, analyze information, and explain geographic patterns (Heffron & Downs, 2012). Because this cannot be done with a singular perspective, teachers should be encouraged to go beyond the realm of a textbook to provide additional sources, as was done in this particular social studies PLC. Providing multiple perspectives, using a variety of research strategies and technologies, encouraging students to analyze the impact they have on society, and creating situations in which students are brainstorming solutions to real-life dilemmas are all considered best practices in social studies (Drake & Burns, 2004).

Levels of Thinking

Discussion about memorization versus higher levels of thinking dominated many PLC meetings, during which the teacher’s previous notions of quality instruction were challenged. While a few created assessments did involve memorized vocabulary or points on a map, most of the discussion revolved around a mutual desire to push students beyond basic levels of thinking. One PLC member noted regarding learning information about the European Union, “I don’t see any value in having kids memorize all of these different things and then spitting them all back out” (PLC Observation 3, November 22nd). However, another relied on rote memorization
because she had a lack of knowledge on the topic, “This is a bunch of mumbo jumbo that our
to get” (PLC Observation 3, November 22).

Teachers should encourage students to engage in higher levels of thinking in the
educational context. According to Bloom et al. (1956), there are six main levels of knowledge-
based goals, including knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and
evaluation. Knowledge is the most basic level of understanding, and evaluation is the most
sophisticated level of comprehension. The purpose of providing a taxonomy of knowledge
allows educators to gain perspective and provide suggestions and goals in curriculum and
assessment development (Bloom et al.). Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) updated Bloom’s
Taxonomy by including remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. Knowledge
was also grouped into factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive. Basic levels of
memorization, including vocabulary words and locations of countries, are grouped as factual.

More experienced geography teachers within the seventh grade PLC encouraged teachers
to use higher levels in Bloom’s Taxonomy by sharing ideas, lessons, and higher-level thinking
activities, including synthesis and evaluation, where students had to use evidence to support an
opinion. John Brown completed one such lesson on November 22, in which groups were doing
an activity created by Sue Smith on the European Union expansion that was observed in her
classroom on November 15. The classes were run in very different fashions; however, both
groups were engaged with their classmates and with technology, and during the final classroom
debates, students knew the targets and could clearly state positives and negatives of membership
in the European Union. Rather than relying on multiple choice assessment where students
memorized random facts, the teachers moved beyond their comfort zone to utilize more activities
that required higher levels of thinking higher on Bloom’s Taxonomy. The educational theories, methodologies, and guiding principles regarding higher levels of thinking encouraged teachers within this geography PLC to reevaluate previously held notions to try new practices in their classrooms.

Cooperative Learning for Students and Teachers

Similar to teachers, when students are socially interacting with varying levels of learning, all levels of learners benefit (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). Interaction and collaboration among people with varying strengths and weaknesses were part of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of socially constructed learning in which students are able to exchange ideas to develop a greater understanding of concepts. Johnson and Johnson (1999) note that cooperative learning must have five basic elements, including positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing, and when this is achieved, cooperative learning results in process gain (ie., more higher-level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions), greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another (ie., group to individual transfer), and more time on task than does competitive or individualistic learning. (p. 72)

Additionally, students’ engagement levels are higher when they have a voice in their learning (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005). Marzano et al. (2001) acknowledge that “individual teachers can have a profound influence on student learning” and identify strategies of effective teachers, including cooperative learning (p. 3). To take cooperative learning to the next level, Kagan (1989) distinguishes between competitive and cooperative structures, noting that with competitive approaches, “students vie for the teacher’s attention and praise, creating negative
interdependence among them” (p. 12). Instead, teachers should be intentionally developing cooperative structures in their classrooms, incorporating strategies that specifically relate to the intended outcome, including structures such as “Jigsaw”, “Roundtable”, “Think-Pair-Share”, or “Numbered Heads Together” (p. 14).

Not only were teachers promoting cooperative learning to members within their PLCs, the PLCs themselves were engaged in cooperative learning with self-reported gains. The teachers within this PLC enjoyed hearing each other’s ideas and were quick to try new suggestions in their own classrooms. Because trust had been established among the ten-member PLC, teachers were open to the advice from others and willing to make changes. This is consistent with Johnson and Johnson (1999), who note that

As relationships become more positive, there are corresponding improvements in productivity, morale, feelings of personal commitment and responsibility to do the assigned work, willingness to take on and persist in completing difficult tasks, and commitment to peers’ success and growth. Absenteeism and turnover of membership decreases. (p. 73)

Cooperative learning within the 7th grade geography PLC proved to have a two-fold benefit for the teachers and ultimately the students.

When social studies teaching was centered on transmission of information or rote methods of learning, the students felt the concepts taught were irrelevant and unrelated to their future (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001; Lintner, 2006; Moroz, 1995; Spires et al., 2008). When teachers relied too much on textbook and lectures, it was an indication the teachers were not prepared to deliver or translate the content in the social studies curriculum (Bolinger & Warren, 2007). Therefore, while these discussions regarding implementing lessons that required higher-order thinking skills and cooperative learning might have been uncomfortable, they may ultimately
have benefited the students, as the teachers chose to implement some new lessons in their classrooms. Furthermore, engaging in socially constructive debates and decision making allows students to be better participants within our democratic society:

In this era of such global challenges as ethnic and religious conflict, growing populations in poverty, increasing competition for limited natural resources, and degradation of the environment, it is essential that all members of society be prepared to make these decisions. (Bednarz et al., 2013, p. 17)

Bishop and Pflaum (2005) reported students value active learning, collaboration, technology, and choice, and like to study relevant curriculum at their own pace. These best practices coincide with those promoted by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1991) Task Force on Social Studies in the Middle Schools, since the overall goal of social studies is to integrate experiences and “knowledge about human endeavors and human relations designed to foster informed and ethical participation in society” (para 5). The NCSS particularly notes teachers must be aware of the unique physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development of middle school students and suggests that by encouraging the motifs of concern with self, concern for right and wrong, concern for others, and concern for the world, teachers can foster students that are prepared for the 21st century. However, if teachers are unprepared for or uneducated about any subject they are required to teach, they resort to teaching from the textbook; according to Schell et al. (2013), “the fastest way to kill student interest in geography is to teach the content as rote memorization from a textbook or set of maps” (p. 66).

The PLC’s focus on cooperative learning was time spent wisely, as students should be engaging in discussions about the world around them. Furthermore, as noted in A road map for 21st century geography education: Instructional materials and professional development, “Instructional materials should include thoughtful questions, discussions, and other activities to
challenge student thinking” (Schell et al., 2013, p. 47). The theory, methodology, and discussions surrounding cooperative learning resulted in new teaching ideas for educators within this PLC, translating into a positive classroom impact.

**Interdisciplinary Lessons**

In middle schools, teachers are better able to address the particular emotional and psychological needs of middle-level students because a team of interdisciplinary teachers shares the same group of students (AMLE, 2010). The observed PLC was in such a middle school. A few days a week they met with their interdisciplinary teams to discuss student needs. In the case of River Middle School, connections between subject areas happened within these team meetings, and ideas of connecting subject areas were brought up frequently within the PLC meetings. This theory coincides with Hess’s Cognitive Rigor Matrix (2013), in which students are encouraged to “Explain how concepts or ideas specifically relate to other content domains or concepts (social, political, historical, cultural)” (Column 4, Row 3).

Furthermore, Nelson (2008) noted the ability of a middle school building PLC to move beyond conversation and actually implement the desired practices within the classroom, as seen in River Middle School’s PLC. Nelson suggests the differences between the other two schools he observed, who were not as successful in their implementation, could be attributed to the sixth to eighth grade school’s commitment to inquiry and transformation of learning, already built into the culture of the middle school teaching environment. Some of the projects created within the PLC could also be defined as project-based learning, which “seeks to blend authentic, real-world experiences with rigorous academic study. Projects, which are usually cross-disciplinary, engage
students in activities that are interesting to them and important to the course of study” (Drake & Burns, 2004, pp.112-113).

In the social studies PLC at River Middle School, unit simulations were developed, all while keeping other subject areas in mind. John Brown reflected on one of these unit creations they worked on as a PLC:

We were defining the pros and cons of being part of the European Union; those were the best meetings that I thought we’ve had all year. When we were actually looking ahead at our curriculum and coming up with that common path. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)

Those particular units involved every other subject area, along with an integration of a variety of shared resources: At the December 6 PLC meeting, one teacher noted how he found articles that included newspaper excerpts from 1917 in the school library, and he gave students the resources and let them explore in “self-directed learning”. Others teachers pointed to a history website, one shared a newspaper article on Pearl Harbor, one shared how they used speeches from Churchill and Roosevelt, while another pointed to content from a museum website (PLC Observation 4). By the end of the PLC meeting, the teachers had a litany of resources students were going to be reading, processing, engaging with, and critically thinking about.

While the field of education has experienced significant paradigm shifts, research suggests that integrating subject areas and making knowledge practical for students has significant benefits. In A Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education, Bednarz et al. (2013) recommend, “interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, drawing on relevant research results” (p. 8). By tying together skills, standards, and concepts within subject areas, results indicate an increase in standardized test scores, a rise in student motivation, and an overall positive impact on student achievement (Drake & Burns, 2004). Regardless of which
integrated approach a teacher chooses, “alignment [across subject areas] is an even stronger predictor of student achievement on standardized tests than are socioeconomic status, gender, race, and teacher effect” (p. 53). Additionally, when this interdisciplinary curriculum is combined with relevant and stimulating experiences for students, they are able to develop a range of perspectives that will prepare them for decision-making in the real world (Jacobs, 1989). Drake and Burns noted that because interdisciplinary learning is meaningful for students, it increases students’ intrinsic motivation. The interdisciplinary focus during PLC meetings was prevalent through the researcher’s observations, and by sharing the methodology behind and strategies for incorporating multiple curricular areas into geography, teachers gained a wealth of new ideas for their social studies classrooms.

World Concept

According to the section “Looking at the world in multiple ways” from Geography for Life: National Geography Standards,

It is essential to be aware that many different perspectives exist and that learning to understand the world from many points of view enhances our knowledge and skills. It is also essential to realize that our perspectives incorporate all life experiences and draw upon knowledge from many fields of inquiry (Heffron & Downs, 2012, p. 17).

With seventh graders, this awareness can be challenging due to the age of students because of the lack of teacher understanding regarding perspective. At times, it has been noted that teachers are naturally resistant to change because they have “entrenched classroom habits” and “many innovations fail because they are poorly adapted to classrooms” (Cohen, 1990, p. 312). However, the members of the social studies PLC at River Middle School were committed to change and
were willing to try many new ideas, particularly when it made sense to them. Interdisciplinary learning made sense, as did a commitment to encouraging students to develop a world concept. All three teachers repeatedly went back to the idea that they wanted students to see a world beyond themselves and care about issues that may not affect them. This desire to for students to “critically think about history: apply understanding in a novel way, provide argument/justification for the application” parallels Hess’s (2013) Cognitive Rigor Matrix and encourages students to engage with learned material. Neumann (2017) supports this idea of encouraging a worldview to better our democratic ideals, in which students are critically thinking about issues, identifying bias within information, and analyzing social issues. White et al. (2007) take the lack of social studies education to a new height, stating they fear for the future of our nation: “American citizens have endangered the republic by failing to educate new generations of citizens about civic responsibility” (p. 228). Furthermore, these scholars believe social studies should not be a repetition of dates, facts, and names, but rather it should be about challenging opinions and developing skills needed to debate within a democratic society. By focusing on a world view, teachers within this PLC showed their commitment to encouraging civic responsibility.

Teachers should be learning new ideas from their peers because of their collective commitment to improving student learning as well as improving and refining teaching practices (Fullan, 2006). “Real change involves changes in conception and behavior” (Fullan, 2007, p. 32). Because all three teachers were committed to change as a result of theoretical discussions on utilizing multiple resources, higher levels of thinking, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary connections, and the student development of a world concept, positive change within classrooms
was visible: “You’re getting a chance to collaborate and work on [meaningful lessons]. I definitely think it’s going to improve your classroom instruction and what you’re doing in the classroom” (J. Brown, Interview 3, January 24, 2012).

3. Instructional Activities in PLCs and Classrooms

After teachers within the PLC felt more comfortable with the content and engaged in debates regarding the theory behind their practice, they were very driven to develop and share activities within the PLC. Fullan (2006) notes the integration of standards into classroom practice is essential, as schools that solely rely on standards are not successful. Schools must be deliberate about connecting content and theory to actual classroom activities for professional development to be effective (Thomas-Brown et al., 2016). From the researcher’s perspective, the activities shared within the PLC were most clearly linked to classroom observations. The teachers shared ideas and thoughts, and as a group they came up with a variety of activities to meet the focused targets. Soon after they tried out those activities within their classrooms. Sharing and reflecting on the others’ lessons took a change in mindset for many teachers; going from teaching a subject independently to openly sharing ideas “was hard because so many people in our building are so private. It’s like, ‘This is mine, mine, mine. And breaking down that barrier was a huge thing that like, [saying] it may be yours, but share it, and play nice with others” (J. Brown, Interview 1, November 1, 2011). Once trust was established, collaborative efforts produced more quality work because “there was kind of a natural trust within the group and a professionalism that’s there” (S. Smith, Interview 1, November 1, 2011).
While the administration desired a greater focus on assessments, the PLC was given enough freedom to choose its main focus for meetings. This correlates with various studies because when PLC implementation is solely up to the administrator, and staff are given no input, teachers become resentful and the change is not successful (Pancucci, 2008; Patterson, 2006). Furthermore, because the teachers identified sharing resources and classroom activities as one of their main areas of focus, their capacity building, or increasing the group’s ability could begin (Fullan, 2005a).

Common Activities

Thomas-Brown et al. (2016) concluded that after providing quality resources and professional development, the observed teachers succeeded in using the resources. Furthermore, “many of the teachers expressed excitement about the new resources and their ability to immediately use the materials in their classrooms” (p. 65). A willingness to try new things also seemed to greatly impact the teachers’ perceptions of PLCs. Even though Barbara Jones was often uncomfortable with the material, she noted:

I’ll try it. I’ll try anything, and I’ll tell the kids we’re trying it. Last year, [another teacher] and I tried [a PLC idea] together. We opened our doors [to combine rooms] because we were nervous. It kind of worked and kind of didn’t, but it gave us the comfort level to see what worked and what didn’t and how to make it work. (B. Jones, Interview 1, November 15, 2011)

The fact that a less experienced teacher was willing to jump in and try out newly shared lessons with her students shows that the conversations within PLCs regarding classroom activities were meaningful. Joyce and Showers (2002) found that while forms of effective training create initial discomfort, like feelings of awkwardness, and require greater effort, the
teachers exhibited greater horizontal transfer in which they were able to directly apply what they were learning to their classroom situation.

Mapping

According to *Geography for Life: National Geographic Standards*, standards are outlined with the goal of enabling students to develop “1) factual knowledge; 2) mental maps and tools; 3) and ways of thinking (Heffron & Downs, 2012, p. 7). While some teachers within the PLC would have interpreted this idea as memorizing locations, other teachers emphatically disagreed with the practice of memorizing and acquiring information and looked at the entirety of the standards. Furthermore, in *A road map for 21st century geography education: Instructional materials and professional development* (2013), research suggest that educators do not teach geography as location, but instead further investigate the “complex connections between places” (Schell et al., 2013, p. 11). After one PLC meeting, Barbara Jones noted the variance between her beliefs in memorization versus John Brown’s opinion against it:

I’m not going to get into it with someone who doesn’t believe in rote memorization of places because that’s what they believe. And that’s what [John] believes. And that you can believe that. I just disagree. And we can agree to disagree. And there’s justification on both sides. (Interview 3, January 25, 2012)

In *A Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education: Geography Education Research* the authors acknowledge an “understanding gap” exists between “the stereotypical view of geography as fact-based and descriptive has proven persistent, no doubt because the stereotype corresponds to the experience of most American students and teachers for generations” (Bednarz et al., 2013, p. 23). This gap was clearly present within the River Middle School seventh grade
Instead of memorization, educators should be providing their students with more. They should go beyond memorization and “present a balanced view of geography that recognizes the importance of learning the place names...along with understanding powerful geographic concepts and being able to reason geographically” (pp. 23-24).

In reality, the essential learning regarding geography goes beyond acquisition and includes formulating questions, acquiring and analyzing information, and communicating geographic patterns (Heffron & Downs, 2012). Simple memorization of maps does not lead to the ability to analyze information or observe patterns, and therefore teachers should provide opportunities for more critical analysis (Bednarz et al., 2013). This idea that students should not be simply memorizing maps resulted in a mismatch for many teachers within the PLC, as some relied on these rote teaching assessments frequently. However, this transition from basic knowledge to critical thinking takes time, and when teachers do not have their own knowledge about these topics, creating higher-level thinking activities is more challenging. Within the PLC at River Middle School, higher level thinking with maps dominated many discussions regarding instructional activities.

These discussions proved valuable, as the researcher noted mapping activities and critical analysis of text being used in multiple teacher observations (Brown Observation 3, December 6, 2011; Smith Observation 4, December 21, 2011; Jones Observation 3, December 20, 2011). The use of specific discussed material influencing teachers’ practices concurs with Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) and Joyce and Showers (2002). This is because teachers transfer more ideas to their classroom when top down mandates vanish and are replaced with peer support, including observations, brainstorming, collaboration, and connection to student
work. Furthermore, critically thinking about maps, charts, graphs, and diagrams is best practice when it comes to social studies pedagogy (Hess, 2013). Subject matter and teaching strategies should be intertwined in continuous training, as they were during many PLC discussions (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Medina et al., 2000). When students have a wide variety of higher level mapping skills, also known as spatial perception skills, students are able to eliminate a wide range of problems within their daily lives by helping people adapt to their daily lives and the environment (Gökçe, 2015).

**Reading Strategies**

Analyzing various forms of media and encouraging students to critically think about the world around them allows students to take greater part in our democratic institutions (Neumann, 2017). However, if students are not able to understand what they are reading, critically thinking about global and historical topics is difficult. Reading, along with the ability to understand complex texts, greatly improves when teachers provide explicit reading strategies to students (Sailors & Price, 2010). Furthermore, Sailors and Price suggest that when teachers are coached through reading strategies, they can help their students become more strategic readers, as “strategic readers monitor their word identification and comprehension and are motivated to solve reading difficulties” (p. 302). In the PLCs at River Middle School, the teachers coached one another through a variety of reading strategies. This PLC also benefited by having teachers expertly trained in other subjects, such as language arts, because these other teachers provided assistance and training to teachers who might not have had the background knowledge. This
way, many teachers within the social studies PLC benefited by learning about and utilizing reading strategies, applying their knowledge in their own classrooms.

Ragland (2008) noted that teachers must understand how facts are tied together through critical reading of primary and secondary accounts and must encourage students to establish a new construct of historical information. Bednarz et al. (2013) identify the need to collect and decipher data within the geography classroom. More specifically, they contend students should spend time developing geographic questions, completing research, and then “organizing and creating representations of data to help solve a problem or answer a question” (p. 25). Once students are able to decode vast amounts of information, geography students should critically analyze the text and data, answer their questions, and report their findings. (Bednarz et al., 2013).

According to Marzano et al. (2001), “there is a growing sentiment that schooling, in general, is resistant to change and that classroom teachers, in particular, are almost impervious to change” (p. 157). However, the teachers at River Middle School proved that this does not apply to all educators. Instead their social studies PLC took the time to share practical lessons and activities, including those that encouraged students to critically analyze information, and teachers were able to take away many valuable, practical reading strategies from their PLC meetings.

Recommendations for Practice

Despite the successes of this particular middle school’s social studies PLC, areas of improvement are always possible. The first recommendation would be that the administration let the PLC set goals rather than focusing so much on creating assessments. Since assessments must
be created with everyone on the same page, a focus must first be on understanding the content. Next, teachers could support each other’s teaching through coaching and observing one another in the classroom. PLCs can also focus on specific theories or ideas, with a concentration on best practices. Finally, outside resources could be to provide more experienced teachers with ideas and strategies who can encourage the flow of new ideas into the group.

**Relaxed Administrative Focus**

According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010), sharing and evaluating student work is an essential component in PLCs, and while it was observed on a few occasions, as in the large multiple-choice district assessment, most of the actual PLC time was spent teaching content to newer teachers, sharing lessons, and brainstorming assessments. When new assessments were created, the teachers felt frustrated and were disappointed by the product (PLC Observation 6, January 24, 2012). When teachers were forced to create an assessment, they created a matching mapping quiz for Asia, going against best practice for geography. Rather, teachers should include content and cognition goals within assessment, encouraging students to critically think about the world (Edelson et al., 2013). Because teachers’ knowledge of the subject they are teaching is essential, the step of creating quality assessments and changing instruction based on the results may take a few years to achieve.

While teachers did check the box and created an assessment for their principal, the teachers acknowledge they knew it was not quality and wished they could have just focused on learning the targets and curriculum. However, when the PLC did just focus on content and learning, it created a cognitive dissonance on the part of the teachers, as all three remarked they
felt their PLC was breaking rules or not doing what it was supposed to be doing: focusing on assessments. John Brown noted, “We’re actually previewing things and as long as we can get away with this [from our administration], I think that’s our best use of time is to go through [lessons] and look at [curriculum]” (Interview 2, December 6, 2011). However, too much focus on data and assessments is counterproductive if teachers do not understand the content they are supposed to be teaching, and it can even lead to failed PLCs (Sims & Penny, 2014). Therefore, the administrative expectations should be relaxed and differentiated based on the experience and understanding of the teachers within the PLC.

In the case of this particular PLC, an instructional focus would be more appropriate due to the varied teaching experiences of the teachers. Hipp et al. (2008) would agree, as they observed optimism, pride, and devotion in PLCs, yet “for change to impact learning, it must focus on instructional practice” (p. 192). Ideally, the administration would have the mutual respect of the PLC members and engage in critical discourse with teacher-leaders and other administrators (DuFour, 1991; Hord, 1997; Pancucci, 2008; Varlas, 2010). Furthermore, if the focus stays on assessment, then teachers should be coached through the remediation aspect of helping students as well. Once teachers identify students who do not meet or exceeded various targets through their use of formative or summative assessments, teachers are supposed to provide intervention time for students to relearn material (DuFour et. al, 2010). However, one of issues right now is trying to find a way to deliver those interventions...We’re developing these assessments, and we’re getting together, and we’re spending all this time in departments, where is it going to go?...It’s just a frustrating thing right now because nobody really has the answer. (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011)

This correlates with what Fullan (2007) described as the “DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor,” in which schools may have data, but they do not do anything with it (p.
9). By engaging in conversations with the PLC members and differentiating expectations for each PLC, teachers could potentially spend more time understanding the basics, allowing them to develop higher quality assessments.

Coaching and Observations

Beyond discussion time in the PLCs, teachers in this circumstance could benefit from observing each other in the classroom and coaching one another in other ways to integrate best practices. At times, complex lesson ideas were shared within PLCs, and the teachers felt overwhelmed by the extensive instructions for how to teach a lesson (PLC Observations 2 and 3, November 22, 2011). Hord (2008) noted that PLCs can take shared ideas to the next level when staff members visit each other’s rooms with the goal of supporting and learning from each other. All the while, the end goal is to achieve “high quality student learning” (p. 13). Joyce and Showers (2002) agree with this aspect of collaboration, as they contend teachers should serve as coaches with the goal of helping others’ acquire skills, providing feedback, analyzing application, and encouraging adaptations to meet students’ needs. Darling-Hammond (2006) continues beyond coaching by also recommending team planning, team teaching, and group research to understand collaboratively what works in the classroom. This PLC should create some sort of rotating observation schedule, providing one another feedback and ideas, and depending on scheduling, could also benefit from co-teaching complex material. While this would require teachers to be more vulnerable and transparent in their knowledge and practices, classroom instruction has the potential to improve.
Study of Best Practices and Theory

Based on the results of this study, teachers within this PLC need more educational theory and ideas of best practices, particularly in relation to geography. There was a real lack of understanding of various educational theories on the part of all three observed teachers, and teachers did not look to research to determine what should be taught; rather, they had intense discussions, yet the conversations were not often productive. At times during the PLC meetings, the teachers engaged in debates about the best ways to deliver content, but there was no observation of teachers bringing in articles, theories, or research on best practices. Teachers should be engaging in studies of best practice within their PLCs and when there is debates, theory should be used to support various reasoning.

Educative teaching materials can be incorporated, both providing insight into content but also reinforcing best practices within the geography PLC (Davis & Krajcik, 2005). Instead, the teachers relied on more experienced teachers and their intuition about teaching; the methodology was never discussed. John Brown reflected on why sharing resources without more theory or explanation was so ineffective: “I am beginning to realize that it is overwhelming if I just send you an email with ten attachments onto it and say, ‘Here you go. Here’s a ton of stuff that you might want to use,’ but don’t really explain it” (J. Brown, Interview 2, December 6, 2011). While he had that insight, when it came to actual meetings, the explanations were basic. John Brown noted, that time was the main reason more theory or research was not discussed during meetings:

[We’re] just meeting once a week. I don’t think it’s necessarily enough time. There’s a part of me that almost wishes we could have 80 minutes every week...we spent 10 minutes today trying to figure out what it was we talked about last time. (Interview 3, January 24, 2012)
By choosing a theoretical focus area for the PLCs, by examining something such as the Cognitive Rigor Matrix (Hess, 2013), or by investigating the practices of effective teachers (Marzano et al., 2001), ideas shared could be more effective. Furthermore, because the focus of this PLC was geography, they could have used the standards and skill set forth in Heffron and Downs’s (2012) Geography for Life: National Geography Standards.

Fullan (2006) argues that learning about standards, assessment, and curriculum only provides teachers with an incomplete picture of education. Darling-Hammond (2006) notes that some of the most successful schools worldwide engage teachers in professional development, researching best practice and completing various forms of reflections and evaluations. Furthermore, “most other high-achieving countries ensure that teachers have time--generally 10 to 20 hours a week--for collaboration, collective planning, lesson study, peer coaching, developing curriculum and assessments, and jointly examining student work” (p. 21). The focus on which best practices and educational theory could be decided by the PLC or the administration, but the connection to practice should be clear. This is because when learning of content is paired with quality instructional activities, teachers’ instruction and student learning improve (Thomas-Brown et al., 2016).

Furthermore, teachers change their practices, but that lasting change is only when teachers see proof of change through student learning (Guskey, 2000). Within his plan, Guskey (2002) notes that administrators must understand that change is slow and hard, and teachers should receive feedback, follow-up, and support. However, between the varied experience levels of the teachers within this PLC and the lack of an achievable focus areas, i.e. quality assessments, this PLC may not have been able to effectively observe changes in student learning.
A greater focus on specific theory, along with more time to support each other, could improve the way teachers were utilizing ideas learned with the PLC.

**Additional Connections for Experienced Teachers**

Finally, to provide support for more experienced teachers within the PLC, outside partnerships, attendance at conferences, or professional networks beyond the school walls could provide training for a few, but also benefit the entire PLC. Because “Geography professionals, K–16 education practitioners, and education researchers/developers play interrelated roles in creating high-quality instructional materials and professional development programs”, teachers within this middle school should have more access to this expertise (Schell et al., 2013, p. 9).

John Brown often felt that the PLC was one sided because of his experience and expertise in the subject, and he could have benefited from outside partnerships:

> Anything that works mildly well I’m willing to share. I’ve shared [lessons that didn’t work] with people and said, ‘Here’s what I did, if you can figure out how to make it work, go for it and let me know.’ And nobody ever does let me know. They probably have about 90% of what I do. (Interview 1, November 1, 2011)

However, he rarely gets anything in return: “I don’t necessarily walk out of there feeling enriched, but I’m okay with that. I think the greater good is going to be from me sharing” (J. Brown, Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011).

School and university partnerships, along with historical societies and museums, can provide enhanced professional development (McCall, 2006). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) note that professional communities could extend to the greater community, and Ball and Cohen (1999) concur that learning should involve larger circles, including “subject matter organizations, study groups, university-school partnerships, or other groups or networks”
When teachers have support and collaboration beyond the school walls, teachers feel reaffirmed in their work and are increasingly committed to change (Hord, 1997). Fullan (2006) calls “lateral capacity building” (p.10) which encourages school districts to share their best ideas and people start identifying with a larger movement beyond their classroom or school. The knowledgeable and experienced teachers carried this PLC in terms of content and activities, and expert teachers should have an outlet to increase their knowledge and encourage them to continuously improve their practices.

Suggestions for Future Research

The effects of PLC on teachers’ lessons and activities need to be studied further. Teacher buy-in and commitment to the process need further investigation, along with the possibilities of further expanding teachers’ Professional Learning Networks (PLNs), and quantitative studies should also be completed to connect teachers’ PLC experiences to their practice.

First, individuals must be committed to the process of collaboration for change to take place (Fullan, 2007). Marzano et al. (2001) identified three ways to turn education from an art to a specific science: educational research must be made available, high quality staff development, including modeling, practice, feedback, allowing for differences, and celebrations, should occur, and “Perhaps most important, educators must have a desire and commitment to change” (p. 157). In the case of the participants in this study, all three teachers were committed to change, collaboration, and student engagement. In the greater PLC, not all participants were engaged in each meeting, and it was widely speculated that while they attended meetings, they did not take much of the ideas back to incorporate change in their classrooms: “It would nice if [all PLC
members] had that same kind of passion or desire [as a few of us]” (J. Brown, Post-Observation Interview 3, December 6, 2011).

Studies should also be completed on middle school social studies PLCs who are further along in their process of implementation to determine: (1) when the transition happens between understanding the content and creating assessments and (2) whether that transition will ever happen with a subject being taught by so many. Furthermore, a wider variety of situations of PLCs should be studied, including teachers and schools representing a greater level of diversity, including age, race, socio-economic status, and number of years’ experience. In-depth qualitative studies of such topics would be beneficial moving forward and could provide teachers and administrators with more insight into the PLC process.

Additionally, as technology enhances teacher communication throughout the world, studies should be completed on the impact of digital PLCs, also known as Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). PLNs allow educators to make connections worldwide; can occur on any digital platform through sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, or Facebook; and can positively impact the teaching environment (Nussbaum-Beach, 2013; Ricoy & Feliz, 2016). On Twitter, for example, various groups of digital chats now exist in which professionals login to the system at a suggested time to share best practices, articles, and lesson ideas. Over time, the groups that have formed these chats function somewhat like a PLC, except they are voluntary and exist beyond walls of the classroom. These digital chats encouraged impassioned educators to branch out beyond their school or district to learn other ways teachers are finding success in the classroom. Ricoy and Feliz (2016) found that by using Twitter in a university setting, the students felt motivated and interaction between participants was enhanced. Furthermore,
Nussbaum-Beach (2013) identified that “the real power of the social web is revealed when you have a plan and a purpose for how you’ll build your network, reap its benefits, and then apply the knowledge you gain” (p. 16). Studies should be completed on how participation in these PLNs impacts teacher practices in the classroom and how districts could further utilize digital platforms to help improve teacher instruction.

Furthermore, the impact of PLCs should also be measured using quantitative methods, including a quantitative survey investigating the link between PLCs and classroom practices. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010) provide quantitative connections between PLCs and student test scores, but little has been examined when it comes to quantitatively linking PLC topics to changes in teacher practices. While qualitative methods worked for this particular study, quantitative studies could assist in a specific measurement of impact (Yin, 2009). The various ideas encouraged in PLCs could be used as variables, and teachers could self-report on the use in the classroom. This sort of case study could provide a substantial amount of quantitative data and offer additional insight that qualitative information alone does not yield (Yin, 2009). By further investigating teacher motivation, digital PLNs, and quantitative links between PLCs and teacher activity, a better understanding of teacher learning could be reached.

Closing

The youth of our country need exposure to a quality social studies and geography curriculum. In a climate where the subject of social studies is not a priority and many teachers are under qualified to teach the specific content, professional development for those teachers should be meaningful and effective. Professional Learning Communities can provide schools
with continued, challenging, and quality support by using the expertise of teachers within their own building. The findings of this research suggest that the teachers valued the time spent within their PLCs, and their knowledge, classroom activities, and attitude toward the subject of social studies changed in a positive way.

By investigating mandates, theories, and activities shared within one middle school geography PLC, the researcher found the teachers were willing and eager to improve classroom instruction if they were provided the time for collaboration. The findings also suggest that the way PLCs are implemented matters. Schools should include theories on educational change along with PLC research to allow teachers to determine the course of their PLCs, provide teachers more time for coaching one another, incorporate best practices into lessons, and encourage teachers to develop support networks beyond the realm of the building. The future of our democracy and interdependent society depends on our youth’s ability to understand and critically assess global issues, and PLCs have the potential to positively impact teacher practices in social studies classrooms. Hopefully the educational system will provide supports for educators so they can more readily collaborate and prioritize social studies education.
REFERENCES


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DuFour, R. (2007a). In praise of top-down leadership. *School Administrator, 64*(10), 38-42


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS
Teacher Name:
Date:
Time: Location:

Interview One:
Personal Background:
1. What is your teaching background?
2. What is your background in social studies?

Learning Community:
3. In your eyes, what is the role or purpose of the social studies learning community?
4. What educational theories are promoted in your PLC?
5. What instructional activities are encouraged within your PLC?
6. Are there any mandates from your PLC?
7. Are there any particular PLC goals for this month or year?

Teaching Strategies:
8. What are your personal goals for social studies?
9. What would you describe as your main teaching method(s) in social studies?
10. Have you tried anything lately you might share with others?
11. Have you tried suggestions from another teacher?
12. What are your opinions regarding times for collaboration?
13. What affects you when making decisions in your instruction?
14. Have you implemented anything in your classroom as a direct result of your PLC?

Interview Two:
Clarify: Master’s/ degrees/ Certifications:

Learning Community:
1. What is the role or purpose of the social studies learning community?
2. What theories are encouraged through your PLC? Have you ever studied different ideas within your PLC?
3. What instructional activities are encouraged? Have you ever studied best practices in your PLC?
4. How do you feel about integrating these new ideas into your classroom?
5. Are there any new mandates from your PLC given from administration?
6. What are the current goals of your PLC?
7. What have been the successes or positive experiences you have had within your PLC?
8. What are the current challenges within the PLC? (size?)
9. What is currently your role in the PLC?
10. What is the role of others within the PLC?
11. Do you have any stories about your PLC that you would like to share?
12. What is your relationship with other members of your PLC?
13. What is your relationship with members of the administrative team implementing your PLC?

Teaching Strategies:
14. Have you tried anything lately you might share with others? PLC versus teaming?
15. In your opinion, what are best practices in social studies?
16. How much time in teams do you spend on social studies?
17. Have you tried suggestions from another teacher?
18. What are your opinions regarding times for collaboration? (Team versus PLC)
19. What affects you when making decisions in your instruction?

Interview Three:

Learning Community:
1. What is the role or purpose of the social studies learning community?
2. What theories (ie: constructivist, behaviorist) are encouraged through your PLC?
3. What instructional activities are encouraged? PLC? Building?
4. How do you feel about integrating these new ideas into your classroom?
5. Are there any new directions for your PLC given from administration?
6. What are the current goals of your PLC?
7. What have been the successes or positive experiences you have had within your PLC?
8. What are the current challenges within the PLC?
9. How do you feel about the overall process of PLC implementation?
10. How do you feel when someone shares a theory, activity, or lesson within your PLC?
11. What are your hopes and/or goals for PLCs?
12. Is there anything you wish had been done differently regarding PLCs? (implementation?, goals?)
13. Realistically, where do you see PLCs going in the future?
14. How have PLCs influenced your teaching?

Teaching Strategies:
15. What roles do targets play in your teaching?
16. What motivates you to change your teaching strategies?
17. Have you tried suggestions from another teacher?
18. What type of instruction is encouraged by your administration? (i.e., institute days)?
APPENDIX B

PLC OBSERVATION PROTOCOL
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<th>Place:</th>
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APPENDIX C

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL
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<td>Instructional Practices:</td>
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<td>Student Assessment:</td>
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### Tie to PLC’s Educational Theories:
**1. Indicator 1:**
textbook vs. alt resources?
**2. Indicator 2:**
memorization vs. experimental?
**3. Indicator 3:**
interdisciplinary?

**Perspectives?**

### Tie to PLC’s Instructional Practices:
**1. Indicator 1:**
common activities
**2. Indicator 2:**
cooperative learning
**3. Indicator 3:**
mapping activities

**Other possibilities:**
- Inquiry based
- Critical thinking
- Going away from the book (resource driven)
- Target driven

- Higher levels of thinking
- Allan Bloom’s Taxonomy
APPENDIX D

POST-OBSERVATION CONFERENCE PROTOCOL
1. Tell me about your lesson today.

2. Is the lesson something you’ve done before or is it something new?

3. Were there any educational theories that were guiding your teaching that I observed today? Which ones?

4. What has influenced your instructional activities today?

5. Would you consider sharing this lesson with your team? Your PLC? Why or why not?
APPENDIX E

ADMINISTRATION INTRODUCTION LETTER
Dear [Administrator Name],

My name is Ellie Reitz, and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University as well as a teacher at Kennedy Junior High in Naperville CUSD 203. My field of interest lies in the curriculum of social studies and various forms of professional development that support teachers. For my dissertation, I am specifically looking at middle school social studies Professional Learning Communities. I am interested in seeing the link between PLCs and classroom teaching along with the teachers’ opinions of PLCs. I would like to complete this study of a social studies PLC within your building during a three-month time span. During this study, confidentiality is ensured through the use of password protected material and pseudonyms for the district, school, and teachers.

If you allow for teachers within your building to participate, three teachers will be asked to complete a series of three interviews over the course of three months. I will be conducting the interviews, which will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour each. They will take place at a time and place convenient to them and their schedule (planning period, after school, etc.). Interviews will be audio taped and transcribed for the purpose of accurate quotes. Once the interviews are transcribed, teachers will have the opportunity to review the transcription and edit anything they feel does not accurately describe their thoughts.

These three teachers will also be asked to allow a series of six classroom observations over the course of three months. These observations will last approximately 45 minutes each, or one class period, and take place within the school building. The observations will be audio taped in order to ensure accuracy of their quotes. Following three of these observations, post-observation conferences will take place, lasting from 20 to 30 minutes, at a time and place convenient for their schedule. These discussions will be audio taped and transcribed, following the same guidelines as previously stated.

Finally, all members of one grade level PLC will be asked to allow six PLC observations of their team meeting. These will take place during a time and location determined by the school. I will be unobtrusively taking notes and an audio recording during these meetings.

As a result of this study, I hope to gain insight in the ways PLCs are being used to impact social studies professional development. More specifically, I am hoping to understand the link between PLCs and teacher practices within the classroom. The results of my research can help schools by showing how educational theories and instructional strategies learned within PLCs are being pragmatically used. Therefore, it has the potential to influence the way social studies is being taught at the middle school level. It could greatly improve professional development, teaching, and as a result, student learning. I look forward to gaining perspective on your teachers’ experiences with Professional Learning Communities!

Please do not hesitate to call (630-740-3855) or email (elliereitz@hotmail.com) with any concerns or questions.

Ellie Reitz
APPENDIX F

TEACHER INTRODUCTION LETTER
Dear Teacher,

My name is Ellie Reitz, and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. My field of interest lies in the curriculum of social studies and various forms of professional development that support teachers. For my dissertation, I am specifically looking at middle school social studies Professional Learning Communities. I am interested in seeing the link between PLCs and classroom teaching and your opinions regarding the PLCs. During this study, confidentiality is ensured through the use of password protected material and pseudonyms, for the district, school, and teachers.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a series of three interviews over the course of three months. I will be conducting the interviews, which will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour each. They will take place at a time and place convenient to you and your schedule (planning period, after school, etc.). Interviews will be audio taped and transcribed for the purpose of accurate quotes. Once the interviews are transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcription and edit anything you feel does not accurately describe your thoughts.

You will also be asked to allow a series of six classroom observations over the course of three months. These observations will last approximately 45 minutes each, or one class period, and take place within the school building. The observations will be audio taped in order to ensure accuracy of your quotes. Following three of these observations, post-observation conferences will take place, lasting from 20 to 30 minutes, at a time and place convenient for your schedule. These discussions will be audio taped and transcribed, following the same guidelines as previously stated.

Finally, all members of one grade level PLC will be asked to allow six PLC observations of their team meeting. These will take place during a time and location determined by the school. I will be unobtrusively taking notes and an audio recording during these meetings.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to gain insight into your teaching and decision-making as a middle school teacher. I look forward to gaining perspective on your experiences with Professional Learning Communities! Please do not hesitate to call (630-740-3855) or email (elliereitz@hotmail.com) with any concerns or questions.

Regards,

Ellie Reitz
APPENDIX G

TEACHER CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in the research project titled *Investigating the Link between Middle School Social Studies Professional Learning Communities and Classroom Practice* being conducted by Ellie Reitz, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to identify the influence of PLCs on teacher practice in the classroom.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do/allow the following over a three month period of time: a) three 45 minute interviews, b) six PLC observations, c) six classroom observations, and d) three 30 minute post-observation conferences.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. I am also free to not answer any questions, if desired. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Ellie Reitz (elliereitz@hotmail.com) at (630) 740-3855 or the study’s advisor, Mary Beth Henning (mhenning@niu.edu) at (815) 753-8591. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8524.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include a better understanding of how Professional Learning Communities relate to classroom instruction.

I have been informed that potential risks include discomfort in interviews and observations and possible breach of confidentiality. I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms for the district, school, and teachers, password protection on the documents, and a locked file cabinet for recorded interviews and papers. Confidentiality during PLC meetings cannot be guaranteed because the researcher cannot determine if members of the PLC will share information.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________________________________
Signature of Subject        Date
I agree to an audio-recording interviews, meetings, and/or observations:
__________________________________________________________________
Signature of Subject        Date
APPENDIX H

PLC CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in the research project titled Investigating the Link between Middle School Social Studies Professional Learning Communities and Classroom Practice being conducted by Ellie Reitz, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to identify the influence of PLCs on teacher practice in the classroom.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to allow six PLC observations over a three month period of time. Ellie Reitz will be unobtrusively observing these PLC meetings, taking notes, and audio recording in order to better understand the content of these meetings.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Ellie Reitz (elliereitz@hotmail.com) at (630) 740-3855 or the study’s advisor, Dr. Mary Beth Henning (mhenning@niu.edu) at (815) 753-8591. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8524.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include a better understanding of how Professional Learning Communities relate to classroom instruction. I have been informed that potential risks include discomfort in sharing ideas around an outside observer. I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms for the district, school, and teachers, password protection on the documents, and a locked file cabinet for recorded interviews and papers. Confidentiality during PLC meetings cannot be guaranteed because the researcher cannot determine if members of the PLC will share information.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject        Date
I agree to allow audio-recording of the PLC meetings which Ellie Reitz is attending:

Signature of Subject        Date
Teachers spent time today creating an assessment for next week:
- Map for countries/landforms
- Debate over memorization
  - PLA in schools?
  - Which ones/justify memorization?
- Go through each country - yes/no
  - Interesting to see teachers' justification
  - Most populated countries in the world
  - Relate to a US location
  - In the news

Checked book homework:
- Shared responses in large group (ended up)
- What type of question "Tag on to previous speaker"
  - "We have worked a lot on tagging so when you have an idea that relates to a classmate, share it."
  - "The tiger was like Tiger Woods."
  - Class got a big kick out of that.

Book questions comment:
- What kind of question was it? QAR
  - We've been working on QAR in LA, so all the kids should know about it. Let's not focus on the others.
States targets at the beginning of the lesson
"I never get through because"
Correct statement. Had 4 bullet points listed and only got to 1 of those points

Students use marking reading strategies for the article
Stop and write a comment to other students in the room - turn to your neighbors and say 5 things
Close your eyes and imagine:
Relaxed environment
"Can we do an extra credit now?"

Looking at a population in China from many perspectives
"Make a brief recommendation to the Chinese government about whether or not they should continue this policy"
"Respond in a PG to this statement."
Special ed kids have impaired thinking.
China's citizens.
"As an outsider, what would you have recommended the Chinese government to do?"
Lots of critical thinking - outside the box after reading.

Dec 14, 1990
Write down facts after looking at textbook on Russia. Share in groups. Write down/don’t write down facts.
- Targets/goals unclear. Wrote down some ideas on Smartboard before class ended.

Quiz - took role in the for debate - which would they want: Norway should join or not join based on facts/feelings from that person’s life.

- Discuss results with him?

1st time we’ve seen the many large students previously given time. Now need to complete on the

Word of caution:
- Believing in the 1C model
- Uncertainty of where going as a district?
- Fad of abandonment of 1C?
- All schools engage?
- How intent goals - implement interventions? - where time came from? - background - came from?
- Frustration of lack of guidance.
- MS model vs 1C - use time in 1C tandem - lack of time/job always in PYP.
- Not allot of time to just ‘let kids flame’
- Multiple goals of 1C - work on assessment - related to instruction

Themes in talk:
- ‘Center’ good of 1C - work on assessment - related to instruction
- Hardly off approach by school leadership - abandoned or improve