A Principal's PLC: Supporting the Development of Professional Learning Communities Through the Lens of a School Leader

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ABSTRACT

A PRINCIPAL’S PLC: SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF A SCHOOL LEADER

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Northern Illinois University, 2023
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Introduction: Supportive principals are essential to the successful development of professional learning communities in schools, and student achievement is also significantly impacted by school leadership. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the development of professional learning communities in a suburban school district north of Chicago.

Methods: Research participants included nine building principals from the target school district. Each principal was interviewed individually for approximately eighty minutes. An open coding method was used to flexibly identify common themes or concepts. Multiple coding cycles were used to further refine patterns and improve objectivity.

Results: The principals’ insights and reflections around purpose or intended outcomes, lessons learned from past experiences, development steps and strategies, the role and needs of the principal, and how success is measured with regard to the development of a professional learning community were all carefully examined. Six themes emerged from an analysis of the data. These themes included the purpose, past experiences, starting at the beginning, the role of the principal, principals’ needs, and ways for measuring success.
Discussion: The results were used to inform considerations and next steps to further develop professional learning communities within the district’s schools. Key ideas included the significance of a universal understanding and authentic belief in the purpose of professional learning communities; essential steps in building professional learning communities; as well as the need for intentional focus, professional development, and a professional learning community specifically for principals. Further exploration is needed around the impact of outside educational consultants; emphasis placed on the role of district level leaders rather than school administrators; clarity for the role of principal in developing professional learning communities; and how to best measure success.
A PRINCIPAL’S PLC: SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF A SCHOOL LEADER

BY

ALLISON BETH STEIN
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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 LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Kelly Summers
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my darling daughter, Evelyn.
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INTRODUCTION

DuFour et al. (2016) call for educators to engage in professional learning communities, or what they define as a “continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it” (p. 10). They argue that educators must act on information, working “collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). Most importantly, the work of educators functioning as a professional learning community reflects three key principles: a focus on results, a culture of collaboration, and ensuring students can learn (DuFour et al., 2016).

I joined my current district in the fall of 2018, following what was described as comprehensive training for both administration and staff in how to function as a professional learning community. I was told the training was initiated to improve practices that result in greater student achievement. That spring we surveyed staff to gather information about strengths and needs related to our growth as a professional learning community. While results indicated that 86% of staff members believed professional learning communities were important, data also reflected a significant need for further direction, support, training, accountability, and feedback regarding multiple professional learning community practices.
At the start of the 2019-2020 school year, we welcomed a new superintendent and identified the need to work with greater intentionality toward developing into a professional learning community. Planning was initiated around the redevelopment of our Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC); building a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS); redesigning School Improvement Plans (SIP) to reflect professional learning community practices; generating comprehensive data decks to ensure clear and consistent analysis of student learning data; securing professional development for administrators, teacher leadership groups, and the staff at large; and facilitating districtwide book studies focused on the development of professional learning communities. Our rebooted efforts serve multiple goals, yet the primary purpose is to unite district stakeholders around effectively addressing very real discrepancies in student learning outcomes. We need more equitable decisions, practices, and results for students. Growing our district as a professional learning community provides an avenue to ensure high levels of learning for all students by closing learning gaps, advancing equity, positively impacting school climate (behaviors) and culture (values and beliefs), and furthering the collective efficacy of staff. Throughout this process, which has involved the collective efforts of multiple stakeholders, principals continue to have a profound impact on both our success and failures.

Dissertation Purpose and Structure

This dissertation focuses on the role of principals as critical to the success of professional learning communities by examining how principals lead and experience their development. In Paper 1, A Literature Review of Professional Learning Communities and the Impact of High-
quality Leadership Practices and Styles, I explore key components and intended outcomes of a professional learning community. Particular emphasis is placed on the facilitation of collaborative school cultures, essential educator actions, and a shared focus on student learning outcomes. Research highlighting how professional learning communities simultaneously influence and are impacted by organizational behavior and educator capacity is also examined, as school leaders play a critical role in this context. An explanation of how high-quality leadership practices and styles serve to nurture the development of professional learning communities is then presented. The Full Range Model of Leadership is used as a theoretical model for facilitating this analysis.

In Paper 2, A Case Study: Principal Leadership in the Development of Professional Learning Communities, a detailed description of my proposed qualitative research study is provided. The purpose of this study is to examine the actions, beliefs, and perspectives of principals related to the development of professional learning communities in a suburban school district. Findings are intended to provide information and considerations that support successful implementation of professional learning communities and more directly or specifically inform my district’s approach to their development.

To explore the ways in which principals in my school district, comprised of nine public schools located in a northern suburb of Chicago, articulate and act on the professional learning community model, the role they play, resources they need, and how they measure success, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do principals define professional learning communities? What do they believe the purpose and intended outcomes of this model are?
2. How do principals believe professional learning communities are developed? What skills, knowledge, and practices are needed? What roles do they believe participants play?

3. What preparation, training, and resources do principals believe they need in the development of professional learning communities?

4. How do principals describe their past and current experiences developing professional learning communities? In what ways do they believe they embrace, resist, or lead development?

5. How do principals measure the development of professional learning communities? What evidence do they identify? In what ways do they respond to their findings?

In Paper 3, Analysis and Reflection, I describe how the results of my qualitative study, along with research around principal practices and styles, may impact, inform, or support the implementation of professional learning communities in our school district. The intent is to provide a roadmap for supporting principal leadership in the successful development of professional learning communities. While the primary audience is district level administrators in my current school district, as this team has the responsibility for and capacity to guide the work of school principals, district level leaders in similar school systems may also benefit from the analysis. The role of principals as critical to the success of professional learning communities is universally relevant. Similarly, principal and superintendent development programs may be keen to consider how this study may inform the direction and guidance inherent to their curricular plans. Helping aspiring principals understand the purpose of professional learning communities,
their role in both leading and operationalizing development, as well as how specific practices and styles may better facilitate this success can benefit the future students and staff they are striving to serve.
What Is a Professional Learning Community?

School reform efforts serve as a catalyst in revamping educational systems and practices for improved student learning. One such effort that has garnered a great deal of attention in calling forward a number of interrelated and positive outcomes is the development of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities represent a holistic school change model that is cyclical. While the primary goal of a professional learning community, and nearly all attempts at critical school reform, is to improve learning for all students, the process of building professional learning communities both requires and supports additional high impact outcomes. These include improved school culture, robust systems and structures that help to facilitate shared goals, and essential teacher practices. Correspondingly, the outcomes of a professional learning community are comprehensive and varied.

Literature arguing for the development of learning organizations as a critical component to school reform gained traction in the 1990s. These efforts focused on the importance of a collaborative systems-oriented approach for how educators work together in supporting student growth and learning (Kilbane, 2009). Ideas around authentic and meaningful collaboration in which educators were provided time and tools to come together around a shared vision began to evolve as impactful practice. Moving this idea of learning communities forward, Hord (2004,
2007) argued that professional learning communities are a “powerful staff development approach and potent strategy for school change and improvement” (as cited in Cranston, 2009, p. 2).

In current practice, a professional learning community is 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. Members of a professional learning community focus on learning, build a collaborative culture in which learning matters, and maintain a relentless focus on results. DuFour et al. (2016) further describe a professional learning community as having a significant impact on both school culture and educator practices. Professional learning communities are intended to engage educators in activities such as identifying a guaranteed and viable curriculum with common criteria for determining mastery of specific standards, attention to common formative assessment data, and using student learning data to inform improved practices for all students and among all team members (DuFour et al., 2016). Most importantly, they reflect three key principles that sustain a school’s culture: a focus on results, a culture of collaboration, and ensuring students can learn.

Key Components of a Professional Learning Community

Examination of professional learning communities reveals a wealth of different components and structures that promote varying levels of success along a range of positive outcomes. Hord (1997) describes five critical attributes for successful professional learning communities: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011), in a similar effort to accurately define successful professional learning communities, conducted studies in
which they used the Professional Learning Communities Assessment to measure school implementation of six, rather than five, key attributes of the model: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, supportive conditions – relationships, and supportive conditions - structures.

This variability among well-researched criteria deemed necessary for the model to succeed can sometimes result in a lack of clarity. Dufour (2004) remarked that the professional learning community process has been used “so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.” (p. 6). Indeed educators have been known to refer to meetings, student assessments, and even administrative templates as singular proof that a professional learning community exists. Still one might also argue that you know a professional learning community when you see it.

Because professional learning communities are a blend of processes and student learning outcomes (Stoll, 2006), the cyclical nature of a professional learning community also characterizes its components and critical structures. That is, the elements required to grow or develop a professional learning community also serve as the resulting positive outcomes that are strengthened with robust implementation. Perhaps three of the most critical structures or components representative of this dynamic and worth exploring in the establishment of fully functioning professional learning communities are specific to collaborative school cultures, essential educator actions, and an intentional focus on student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). Each is reviewed below.
Collaborative School Culture

The foundation of a professional learning community rests on the “establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (Seashore et al., 2003, p. 3). Structurally, there are key pieces that promote access and opportunity for the development of this kind of school culture, such as shared planning time as well as the systems and resources needed to deliver timely and robust interventions and extensions to students. Authentic and vulnerable collaboration, however, drives the thoughtful and integrated approach needed by teams of educators to achieve success within these systemic structures.

Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011) argue that the development of a professional learning community is best represented as a cultural journey rather than a checklist of tasks or tools. They emphasize the purpose or meaning of the work for educators within the school or district and distinguish significant cultural differences between conventional schools and those that function as professional learning communities. For example, an isolated learning environment with limited reflection on instructional practices juxtaposes to the collective and ongoing analysis of teaching and learning data. It is this more challenging and complex evolution, driven in part by a sense of urgency to improve learning for all students, that researchers identify as foundational to professional learning community development.

Newman’s (1996) research points to five components of professional learning community development, including the cultural components of shared values and norms, deprivatization of practices, and a collaborative focus (as cited in Schapp & Brujin, 2017). Newman’s “common
vision for student learning and agreements that involve collaborating, sharing, and reflection on their practice” (Kilbane, 2009, p. 186) is supported in other research, including a framework developed by Louis et al. (1996). This framework reflects both structural and cultural elements. While the structural components include “scheduled plan time, teacher empowerment, staff size, and staffing complexity,” cultural shifts are represented by “supportive leadership, feedback on instructional performance, openness to innovation, respect, and professional development” (Kilbane, 2009, p. 187). Similarly, Sims, Rachel and Penny (2014) described the cultural components necessary for professional learning community development as “a sense of community, commitment to increasing student learning, and trust” (p. 42).

Much of the research around school culture as essential to professional learning community development points to the importance of shared vision and purpose. Andrews and Lewis (2007), for example, found that collective decision making is an outgrowth of a common vision and purpose. Teams of educators coming together around a common goal also reflect a belief in the benefits of interdependence and collaborative learning. The professional learning community model presented by DuFour et al. (2016) identifies this critical idea as one of its three key principles – namely, a culture of collaboration.

An important distinction must be made about the focus of these collaborative efforts, as the shared purpose instrumental to a professional learning community is a clear intent to improve student learning rather than coming together around procedural or managerial needs. Nehring and Fitzsimmons (2011) describe conventional schools as primarily focused on logistical or procedural levels of thinking; teachers work in isolation without a sense of collective responsibility around long-term goals that focus on student learning. These educators may come
together around dismissal procedures, recess schedules, or setting an assembly date.

Alternatively, school cultures supporting professional learning community development reflect a relentless focus on student learning outcomes, improved instruction and assessment practices, and a collective commitment to shared goals. These school cultures, marked by authentic collaboration around a shared vision that promotes student growth and learning are those that achieve positive outcomes for students when paired with two additional bedrocks of the professional learning community model: essential educator actions and an intentional focus on results.

**Essential Educator Actions**

Professional learning communities require that educators working within a collaborative school culture around a shared vision of improved student learning participate in key actions or behaviors to achieve their goals. One of the most critical behaviors may be active participation in reflective dialogue. This kind of dialogue engages educators in collaborative analysis around factors that improve student learning. Practically, this includes the ongoing practice of sharing and analyzing student learning goals, instructional practices, assessment tools, and performance data to best meet students’ needs and ensure their success.

Newman (1996) identifies reflective dialogue as one of the five components necessary for the development of a professional learning community. Similarly, Boyd and Hord (1994) assert that collaborative reflection and discussion is critical. To be most effective, this reflective dialogue takes place within a school culture that nurtures trust, vulnerability, and urgency around a shared goal of student learning. And, in fitting with the collaborative culture of a professional
learning community, reflective dialogue provides a framework and method for continuous and collective reflection. This is not to suggest that the dialogue of a professional learning community has a narrow focus but rather that the dialogue’s intended outcome is clearly identified and shared by all participants.

As suggested by Sims and Penny (2014), professional learning communities must engage in reflective dialogue around any and all factors relevant to improving student learning outcomes. In fact, their study found that educational teams focused solely on only one indicator of student learning (such as common formative assessment data) failed to fully develop as a professional learning community. The narrow approach of these teams left gaps in areas that substantially impacted student learning gains. Subsequently, the researchers argue that professional learning communities cannot simply focus on examining data when engaged in reflective dialogue. Within a professional learning community, educators must participate in “rich and deep collaborative discussion of all aspects of the learning environment, teaching practices, and outcomes” (p. 44). This includes ongoing research in best practices to improve student learning as well as continuous and collaborative questioning and problem-solving (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Further defining reflective dialogue within a professional learning community, DuFour et al. (2016) argue that collaboration among educators does not produce results unless it is “focused on the right work” (p. 59). They describe this type of collaboration as a “systematic process in which teachers work together independently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school” (p. 12). In alignment with this definition, DuFour et al. strategically identify four key questions that support
the effective collaborative efforts of teams working as a professional learning community to achieve high levels of learning for all students: What is it we want our students to know and be able to do? How will we know if each student has learned it? How will we respond when some students do not learn it? How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

The essential actions of educators working collaboratively in a professional learning community to answer these four questions necessitate purposeful and reflective dialogue representative of the practices that impact school improvement (DeFour, 2004, p. 6). Key actions include the development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, which serves to answer the first question “What is it we want our students to know and be able to do?” In a guaranteed and viable curriculum, educators collaboratively identify prioritized learning standards for each course and grade level and develop pacing calendars to ensure instructional time is made available to teach this prioritized content. Demonstrating a commitment to answering the second question, “How will we know if each student has learned it,” members of a professional learning community then work together to engage in the identification of high impact instructional strategies, development of robust assessments, use of student learning data to measure student progress toward mastery of prioritized learning standards, and analysis of other student outcomes to ensure success.

In responding to questions three and four, professional learning community members reflect on student learning data as well as other agreed upon student indicators and decision-making rules to identify students for intervention or extension. Educators then actively support these students within a comprehensive multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that effectively addresses academic as well as social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Progress is monitored
with a results-orientation to determine next steps. In this cyclical model, educators use four key questions and specific processes to collaboratively and consistently act on information in an effort to best support student learning. Their efforts are representative of the essential actions necessary for the successful development and strengthening of a professional learning community.

Focus on Student Learning Outcomes

Perhaps the most critical component to the development of a professional learning community is an intentional and universal focus on student learning. Often this requires a shift in school culture that moves away from a focus on teaching to one that prioritizes learning and subsequently creates an urgency for educators to authentically engage in the aforementioned essential teacher actions. In establishing this renewed purpose, educators must ask themselves, “Are we here to teach, or are we here to ensure that our students learn?” (Buffum et al., 2012, p. 17). In addition, members of a professional learning community must believe that all students can learn and demonstrate collective responsibility and commitment toward affecting high levels of learning. In this way, professional learning communities function to actualize a clearly defined collective goal (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011).

Both researchers and practitioners contend that a focus on improved student achievement is significant in the successful development of professional learning communities. Newman’s (1996) research supported this idea, finding that clarity of focus around student learning is a key component in the development of professional learning communities. Hord (1997) argued that attention to student learning is a primary indicator of professional learning communities at work.
Nehring and Fitzsimmons (2011) concurred with these findings and included the prioritization of teaching and learning practices as a core characteristic in their description of professional learning communities. Fullan (2001) also assertively articulated this collective demand for a focus on student learning outcomes within a professional learning community model.

DuFour (2016) proposes that the purpose of school is to promote high levels of learning for all students and that professional learning community members are charged with focusing on student learning evidence to ensure that purpose is actualized. Correspondingly, he establishes a focus on student learning outcomes in his itemization of the three big ideas that he maintains drive professional learning community development. That is, he contends that members of a professional learning community focus on learning, build a collaborative culture in which learning matters, and maintain a relentless focus on results. This argument sets a clear expectation for success. It is not the act of collaborative reflective dialogue alone that leads to school improvement. Instead within a professional learning community model, one must consider the focus of that collaboration.

To be clear, DuFour’s (2016) argument for a results orientation does not limit educators in their collaborative reflective dialogue and corresponding essential actions. Instead educators working within a professional learning community are charged with considering multiple factors that contribute to improved student learning outcomes. For example, student achievement results are analyzed to determine mastery of prioritized learning standards and next steps in meeting students’ specific learning needs as well as the effectiveness of contributing instructional practices. The big idea, here again, is that all educators within a school have shifted their focus to
student learning outcomes and how best to positively impact those outcomes. Essential teacher actions, framed within the context of a collaborative school culture, reflect that shared focus.

**Summary of Key Components**

Interestingly, many of the components necessary for the effective functioning of professional learning communities are also further developed and strengthened through the work of that community. In this way, they serve a dual role of critical attributes and positive outcomes. This is certainly true for the three foundational elements detailed above: collaborative cultures, essential educator actions, and a focus on student learning. The cyclical and interrelated nature of these key components are a hallmark of the professional learning community model, as is the substantial role of school principals.

**Intended Outcomes of a Professional Learning Community**

A growing body of research is developing to support the idea that student achievement improves when educators participate in professional learning communities. Like Hord (1997), Toole and Louis (2002) also claim that professional learning communities can lead to school improvement. They describe the “mutually influencing concepts” of a professional school culture that reflects an emphasis on learning and attention to personal connection; the resulting culture is one that “makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 247). These positive effects are reflected in multiple longitudinal studies, which produce clear indicators that the implementation of data-driven professional learning communities positively impacts student achievement.
Hord (1997) describes how the work of a professional learning community reflects an inherent focus on student learning. In doing so, she explains the need for collaborative professional discourse and essential actions grounded in a shared goal of improved learning outcomes for all students. Strongly emphasizing the connection between the development of educators and positive student learning outcomes, she calls for teachers and administrators to engage in continued cycles of learning and application toward improved instructional practices that benefit students. To further define the ongoing collaborative, intentional, and action-oriented work of educators toward improved student achievement, she suggests the alternative term “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (p. 10).

Additional research supports the idea that student achievement improves when educators participate in professional learning communities, in large part due to the aforementioned development of a collaborative culture and improved teacher effectiveness that positively impact school functioning. Rasberry and Mahajan (2008) argue that when schools meet criteria for successful implementation of professional learning communities, both instructional practices and student performance improve. Referencing research conducted by Louis and Marks (1998) and Hord (1997), they assert that educators working as professional learning communities learn and apply improved instructional practices and student learning tasks that result in higher student achievement scores.

Similarly, McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) cite analyses by Pearson Achievement Solutions in which student learning outcomes are measured against the development of professional learning communities within grade level teams. Student learning was tracked before and after PLC structures were implemented and then compared with similar district schools.
Findings indicated significant learning gains that corresponded with the development of professional learning communities.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) also report the positive impact of teacher collaboration on student learning in their own correlational studies of professional learning community practices. For example, they reference an increase in the number of students moving from “off track” to “on track to graduate” in schools implementing professional learning communities (p. 36). They identify the student-centered approach of collaborative educators working in cycles to assess and respond to students’ learning needs, an essential educator action within a professional learning community model, as a key contributing factor. Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011) reference similar research, including analysis of 11 studies that support the impact of professional learning communities on teachers’ practices. They highlight the role of PLCs on achievement and assert that the idea of schools working as professional learning communities is largely accepted by both educators and researchers due to the numerous findings that the model results in positive student learning gains.

Perhaps most notable for educational practitioners, DuFour et al. (2016) strongly advocate for the development of professional learning communities as a means for schools to improve teacher practices and achieve substantial student achievement gains. In their argument for implementing this significant reform model, they define a professional learning community as a “continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it” (p. 10). Educators engage in such professional activities as identifying a guaranteed and viable curriculum with common criteria for determining mastery of specific standards,
administering common formative assessment aligned to those learning goals, and using the resulting student learning data to inform improved practices for all students and among all team members. These intentional and essential actions on behalf of educators working within a professional learning community model are designed to positively impact the growth and learning of all students.

**Summary of Intended Outcomes**

As the aforementioned researchers and practitioners have established, collaborative efforts toward improved student outcomes within a professional learning community model benefit the growth and learning of educators, and working in a professional learning community provides opportunities for educators to learn from one another so they can further develop their practices – more specifically, engaging in the essential educator actions of analyzing student data to identify effective instructional strategies, participating in collaborative articulation to ensure shared understanding and clarity around student learning objectives, and learning from the success or failings of colleagues with regard to curriculum development, instruction, and assessment promotes teacher development.

Still most educators and educational researchers agree that the intended primary outcome of professional learning communities is not the development of educators in and of itself. Instead the development of educators as skillful and active professional practitioners is an “intermediate capacity-level outcome” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 228) that grows in tandem with a collaborative school culture to serve a much larger purpose – namely, improving student achievement. Stoll et al. mirror the assertions of Hord (1997) when they explain that professional learning
communities are intentionally designed to improve teacher practice for the benefit of students. To further articulate the fundamental or primary purpose of professional learning communities, they also reference the work of Bolam et al. (2005). They contend that professional learning communities exist to advance student learning, with the growth and learning of educators as a necessary support.

This more student-focused and servant-oriented interpretation is the foundation of the professional learning community model and drives the work of all participants. That is, in a professional learning community, educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. The ultimate and most critical intended outcome of functioning professional learning communities is high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2016).

Organizational Behavior and Educator Capacity in a Professional Learning Community

In addition to the intended outcomes and key components of a professional learning community, both organizational behaviors and educator capacity influence and are impacted by its development. That is, specific organizational behaviors help to grow a professional learning community and are then reinforced or further strengthened by its success. Similarly, building the capacity of educators is instrumental to developing a professional learning community, and continued engagement in the practices of a professional learning community also supports capacity building. The reciprocal and reinforcing relationship of organizational behavior and
educator capacity within a professional learning community is important to explore in defining the ongoing work and supporting conditions necessary for its development.

Organizational Behavior

Research by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) speaks to the significance of organizational behaviors in enhancing the growth and development of professional learning communities. They maintain that professional learning community members working within a community of practice participate in a culture that serves to build shared understanding, common language, and belonging. This culture includes provisions for autonomy and empowerment, which lead to greater motivation and accountability for educators to engage in the essential actions of a professional learning community (Kilbane, 2009). Correspondingly, collective responsibility for student learning emerges as a construct instrumental to the success of the professional learning community model. Shared ownership “puts peer pressure and accountability on those who do not do their fair share, and eases isolation” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Indeed, teachers’ perceptions of themselves and others impact the behavior of the organization as a whole, and those behaviors lead to either positive or negative gains in student achievement. Organizational behaviors that reflect a collaborative and collective interest in learning on behalf of the educators within it are those that lead to improvements in student learning. This is not to say that collaboration alone, as an organizational behavior, is enough to engage educators in professional learning. As Kennedy and Smith (2013) contend, teachers
typically value behaviors similar to their own at the expense of exploring alternative actions. These tendencies prohibit professional growth and development.

Only collaborative behaviors that reflect collective responsibility, reflection, and efficacy within a professional learning community model serve to improve teacher practices and, subsequently, positively impact student achievement (Kennedy & Smith, 2013). For example, educators who engage in ongoing collaborative cycles of collective inquiry and action research with the goal of ensuring high levels of learning for all students demonstrate the organizational behaviors indicative of a professional learning community. Lee et al. (2011) explain how these essential collaborative actions result in learning gains for both the participants and the students. They write that the development of professional learning communities not only improves the practices of the educators within it but also positively impacts student achievement.

Kennedy and Smith (2012) argue that the use of student learning data alongside the professional development of educators within a professional learning community model also result in effective organizational behaviors. Behaviors like collective learning and effective decision making are identified as resulting practices, further demonstrating how educator behaviors essential for the success of a professional learning community are continually strengthened through its implementation. Here, again, the work of Kennedy and Smith is not unlike that of Lee and colleagues (2011), who found that collective learning as an organizational construct led to improved efficacy and, thereby, highly effective professional learning community practices. That is, the organizational behaviors required for teams of educators to develop into a professional learning community were enhanced through their work in that community.
Lee et al. (2011) went on to argue that organizational behaviors, specifically those that reflect professional learning community development, increase teachers’ collective efficacy around instructional practices – namely, collective learning, shared and supportive conditions, shared and supportive leadership, and faculty trust in colleagues. They are clear in identifying these organizational behaviors as those that improve collective efficacy and further explain collective efficacy as “presenting the shared beliefs of teachers within the school” (pp. 820-821). Their study, which involved surveying teachers from randomly selected schools in Hong Kong, further clarified the importance of developing organizational capacity to improve student learning.

In thinking about the successful development of effective organizational behaviors reflective of a professional learning community, the work of Underwood, Mohr, and Ross (2016) is relevant. They focus on leadership behaviors and effectiveness, arguing that leadership quality significantly impacts the success of an organization. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) also address organizational behaviors within the context of leadership. They explored the impact of district-level organizational behaviors on school-level leadership and the connections between these influences and student achievement. Imperative to their research was the importance of organizational design – specifically, professional learning communities. Results indicated that a leader’s level of effectiveness directly and significantly impacted a district’s culture, focus on student achievement, and the instructional quality of the educators within it (Leithwood & Jantzi).

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) further assert that district leaders may build collective efficacy among school level leaders by engaging in behaviors that “emphasize the priority they
attach to achievement and instruction, provide targeted and phased focus for school improvement efforts, and . . . build cooperative working relationships with schools” (p. 496). Behaviors such as these were linked with student achievement via the development of collective efficacy and attributed almost entirely to organizational actions rather than the personal characteristics or experiences of the leaders themselves.

Educator Capacity

DuFour (2016) proposes that school improvement is the result of capacity building and that the best way to build capacity is through professional learning communities. Capacity building, in this context, represents the development of an educational team’s collective belief in a shared ability to positively impact student learning. DuFour argues for the importance of capacity building by claiming that schools are only as good as the professionals working in them and references Fullan’s (2010) stance that collective capacity is essential for school reform. Authentic engagement in the intended work of a professional learning community is a means for generating this collective capacity, which serves to promote student growth by continuing to inform improved decisions and practices.

Zonoubi, Rasekh, and Tavakoli (2017) explored educator capacity in their investigation of professional learning communities. Their work further highlights how collective teachers’ beliefs and sense of belonging to the school or district community impacts student learning. As the outcomes of their study suggest, teacher motivation, commitment, and efficacy are positively impacted by the development of professional learning communities. These factors, in turn, contribute to improved student performance. They also cite Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy
as well as Bandura (1997), whose combined research tells us that increases in collective teacher efficacy (teachers’ perceptions that the efforts of the faculty have a positive effect on students) result in corresponding increases in staff motivation and performance and their students’ learning. Consequently, nurturing the collective values and beliefs of staff is essential when pursuing high levels of learning for all students.

Olivier and Kiefer (2006) also examined the relationship between collective efficacy and capacity within the structure of a professional learning community. They focused their efforts on an elementary school in Louisiana, from which they gathered data over a five-year period. Interviews and surveys were administered, using instruments such as the Professional Learning Community Assessment also employed by Lee et al. (2011). This instrument is reflective of Hord’s (1997) five critical attributes for successful professional learning communities. Students’ standardized test scores were tracked as well.

Olivier and Kiefer (2006) found positive correlations among teacher leadership, collective efficacy, and the professional learning community dimensions measured in the Professional Learning Community Assessment. More specifically, they found that professional learning communities strengthened teachers’ collective efficacy and capacity building. Moreover, like Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004), they confirmed that student achievement improved as a result of these correlations and student performance scores steadily increased over the five year timeline, as evidenced by Louisiana’s State Accountability System.

Kennedy and Smith (2012) addressed the relationship between organizational culture and efficacy within a professional learning community. Here, again, efficacy is a behavior essential to functioning professional learning communities in that educators must work collaboratively in
cycles of collective inquiry and research to achieve better results for the students. Kennedy and Smith cite numerous sources to confirm the link between teacher efficacy and student achievement, arguing that a greater understanding of efficacy sources should serve to inform organizational behaviors that improve both teacher practice and student outcomes.

From this organizational standpoint, DuFour et al. (2016) contend that developing systems and structures with clear and specific processes builds the capacity of educators to work collaboratively toward improved teaching practices. This ultimately results in student learning gains. Likewise, Tschannen-Moran and Barr propose that developing systems and structures with clear and specific processes serves to build the capacity of educators to work collaboratively toward improved teaching and learning practices. In parallel with these organizational processes, capacity building also requires shared leadership. Ho, Ong, and Tan (2020) argue that to build educator capacity toward the successful development of professional learning communities, school and district leaders must provide educators with “clarity and alignment through strategic direction and supporting structures, while simultaneously enabling the distribution of leadership to teachers” (p. 635).

Ho et al.’s (2020) study, focused on professional learning community structures in Singapore schools, found that professional learning communities require the distribution of instructional leadership. While educators benefit from clear and consistent direction, Ho et al. emphasize the importance of building structures and sharing guidance that promotes teacher ownership of professional learning community processes. Therefore, the development of collective teacher efficacy and corresponding leadership structures inherent to a successful professional learning community requires the sharing of influence or ownership. As Leithwood
and Mascall (2008) suggest, “influence seems to be an infinite resource in schools . . . the more those in formal leadership roles give it away, the more they acquire” (p. 529).

Summary of Organizational Behaviors and Educator Capacity

The interwoven impact of professional learning communities on organizational behavior and educator capacity cannot be overstated. Professional learning communities foster, support, and reflect both effective organizational behaviors and robust educator capacity while also requiring their continued development for educators to fully and successfully participate. Moreover, organizational behaviors indicative of a professional learning community serve to build the capacity and collective efficacy of educators while the reverse is also true. Educators working within a professional learning community use their capacity to further grow and establish organizational behaviors that help achieve their goal of improved outcomes for all students. Here, again, is a demonstration of how professional learning communities are not a means to an end but rather an ongoing process of school improvement (DuFour et al., 2016). Professional learning communities simultaneously impact and reflect the behaviors, beliefs, capacity, and practices of the educators within it.

Principals and Professional Learning Communities

Louis and Kruse (1995) also contend that supportive principals are essential to the successful development of professional learning communities in schools. Indeed professional learning communities are “anchored in the notion that a principal is responsible to enhance the attitudes, skills and knowledge of staff, create a culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge . . . and hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result” (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). If principals are critical to the success of professional learning communities, they must serve as a focus for improvement efforts. Prioritizing the
selection and development of principals will follow as a logical next step to best impact student learning through professional learning community implementation and growth. How principals may best work to develop professional learning communities, and specifically how principal practices and styles can impact professional learning community success, is critical to explore.

High-Quality Leadership Practices

Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) analyzed six longitudinal studies representative of current principalship and more reflective of additional relevant data than previous reports of its kind. They concluded that school principals have a significant impact on student achievement and other critical outcomes. As evidence, they translated their findings of the differences between below and above average principals into an impact of approximately 2.9 months of student learning gains in math and 2.7 months of learning gains in reading. Perhaps most critical to the practitioners following such an analysis, their report also identifies four high-quality principal practices related to the positive results. These principal practices are described as “instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate; facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; and strategic resource and personnel management processes” (p. 88).

Instructional Impact

The first impactful principal practice identified by Grissom et al. (2021), high level instructional behaviors and interactions, reflects demonstrated expertise and dedication to such activities as coaching around instructional practices and teacher appraisal as well as the
establishment of data-driven systems and processes that serve to further those professional exchanges. Principals with high levels of instructional impact not only know and understand best practices in teaching, learning, and assessment, but they also help develop other educators toward the successful implementation of these methodologies through effective feedback and purposeful coaching. Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) define this high-quality principal practice as one that “provide(s) teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed” (p. 3). They argue that the specific instructional leadership practices of “offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and providing appropriate models of best practice” (p. 9) are those that positively impact schools.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019) reinforce the impact of instructional leadership on the effectiveness of educators and, subsequently, student learning. They highlight the specific practice of “providing instructional support” (p. 4) and reference findings from their previous report. In doing so, they emphasize that the primary function of leaders is to improve the performance of teachers, as a teacher’s performance is directly related to student learning.

Moving toward a clearer picture of instructional behaviors and activities that exemplify high-quality leadership, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2006) identified 21 leadership behaviors aligned with student achievement. They contend these behaviors serve as common practice for high-quality principals. One of these behaviors is knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; the other is involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In practice, these behaviors reflect a school leader’s expertise in knowing and understanding effective teaching and learning practices, ability to provide guidance to others around those practices, and active participation in the development or improvement of corresponding learning
activities, instructional methodologies, and assessments for implementation. Identification of these activities as representative of high leverage instructional leadership practices impacting student learning are strongly connected to what Waters et al. (2003) first described as “intellectual stimulation” (p. 4).

Intellectual stimulation involves the principal in not only ensuring one’s own knowledge of effective educational theories and practices is up to date, but also the knowledge of the staff and colleagues. This is not a far leap from Fullan’s (2001) assertion that it is necessary for principals to know and understand best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment to best support educators. Further, a school leader practicing intellectual stimulation is charged with facilitating ongoing and meaningful discussion with staff members focused on the research behind effective schooling (Marzano et al., 2006). Through this professional discourse, school leaders provide high-quality professional development for their staff. Similarly, these principals work to identify other relevant professional opportunities to facilitate the growth and learning of staff, such as external training and development sources. They actively design professional learning. Indeed principals engaged in instructional leadership behaviors reflect the prioritization of professional development as instrumental to success (Stoll et al., 2006).

Also critical to high-quality instructional leadership practices is the principal’s use of data to inform needed action (Grissom et al., 2021). Within the instructional domain, these effective principal practices include engaging in goal setting, progress monitoring, and intentional reflection that makes meaningful use of student learning data. Correspondingly, Marzano et al. (2006) identified monitoring/evaluating as having one of the highest correlations to student academic achievement and Leithwood et al. (2019) specifically noted “monitor student learning
and school improvement progress” as a key leadership practice of successful school leaders (p. 4). Notably, the ability to use data toward improved student learning is not limited to the high-quality principal practice of instructional leadership. Like so many other pieces of the leadership puzzle, this behavior is also linked to other key practices such as the development of professional learning communities and the systemic organization of resources. In fact, high impact principal practices around the use of data can be found across a variety of leadership projects, tasks, and responsibilities (Grissom et al., 2021).

The aforementioned research, including the more current report authored by Grissom et al. (2021), suggests that much work has been done to better clarify the specific high-quality principal practices, representative of effective instructional leadership, that positively impact schools. The significance of the principal’s engagement in high level instructional activities as a high-quality leadership practice has been made abundantly clear. As Elmore (2000) stated, educational leadership “is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement” (p. 13).

Culture and Climate

The second effective principal practice highlighted by Grissom et al. (2021) reflects the school leader’s efforts to build a productive culture and climate. That is, leadership practices that support a “school environment marked by trust, efficacy, teamwork, engagement with data, organizational learning, and continuous improvement” (p. 56). Attention is paid to the development of school culture (shared beliefs among educators) as well as to the school climate (the resulting behaviors and actions supported by intentional systems and structures). To further clarify the meaning of a productive culture and climate, Grissom et al. (2021) cite the term
“academic optimism” coined by Bevel and Mitchell (2012). This term represents the trust between stakeholders, effective and purposeful communication around shared goals and expectations, and protected time for educators to engage in activities that serve to improve teaching and learning (Grissom et al.).

The foundation of this high-quality leadership practice is the establishment of a shared purpose. That is, “setting directions – charting a clear course that everyone understands” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 3). The impact of this practice is unmistakable, as it contributes to the development of a common vision and shared goals that drive school culture and establish school climate. Leithwood et al. argue this leadership practice makes a substantial impact, especially when coupled with high expectations, regular progress monitoring, and effective communication around the identified vision and goals. The significance of this leadership practice is further emphasized by Marzano et al. (2006), who subscribe to a similar definition of culture: “the extent to which the leader fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation among staff” (p. 48). As one of their 21 high-quality practices for school leaders, culture-building reflects the principal’s efforts toward promoting “cohesion, a sense of well-being… an understanding of purpose … (and) a shared vision of what school could be like” among all staff (p. 48). These practices have clear implications for the development and implementation of school improvement plans focused on high levels of learning for all students.

Also critical to the high-quality practice of developing a productive school culture and climate is the principal’s demonstrated care and concern for both staff and students, which Stoll and colleagues (2006) referred to as the human side of leadership. Authentic and meaningful relationships between a school leader and the stakeholders contribute to the positive development
of other practices related to school improvement. For example, Fullan (2001) argues that the relationship between the principal and staff supports alignment and attention to shared goals. Building and sustaining these personal relationships with the staff also better ensures an awareness of their professional and personal needs. Leithwood et al. (2019) clearly identify building trusting relationships and attention to the needs of individuals as key practices indicative of successful school leaders. Furthermore, an actionable interest in the well-being of staff is among the characteristics Hallinger, Lee, and Ko (2014) identified as commensurate with high principal quality.

As stated, protecting time for educators to engage in the work needed to improve learning for all students is another indicator of high-quality principal practice related to the building of a productive school culture and climate. It is necessary for the principal to limit distractions so staff can focus on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2019). While this behavior may be representative of the high-quality leadership practices related to strategic management, preserving time for all educators to engage in the shared mission and vision of the school is also reflective of school culture. Similarly, it affords educational teams the opportunity to participate in behaviors and actions reflective of a productive school climate supported by intentional systems and structures. Marzano et al. (2006) refer to this practice as discipline, or the protection of teachers “from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus” (p. 42). It is this active removal of interruptions and distractions, the noise of schooling unrelated to student learning, that further exemplifies a high-quality leadership practice. Discipline helps ensure a school’s shared purpose may be realized.
Finally, the high-quality principal practice of building a productive school culture and climate includes the consistent and purposeful nurturing of teacher leadership. Leithwood et al. (2004) describe this as the ability to “empower others to make significant decisions” (p. 27) and to “distribute leadership” (p. 4) among staff. Here, we see the fusion between the development of school cultures and climates indicative of student success and the development of robust professional learning communities via active and intentional efforts toward improved teacher leadership.

**Collaboration and Development of Professional Learning Communities**

Grissom et al. (2021) identify a third high-quality principal practice related to positive outcomes, the facilitation of collaboration and professional learning communities. Specifically, the act of school leaders intentionally developing and implementing “strategies that promote teachers working together authentically with systems of support to improve their practice and enhance student learning” (p. xv). In describing this practice, the researchers cite the power of collaborative professional learning communities in reinforcing positive impacts resulting from other high-quality principal practices. That is, engaging in robust instruction leadership and building a productive school culture share some parallel behaviors and outcomes with the facilitation of collaboration and development of professional learning communities. In addition, they reference research supporting a school leader’s advancement of professional learning communities to successfully increase collective efficacy and collaboration toward improved student learning.
School leaders engaged in the high-quality practice of developing their schools or teams into professional learning communities demonstrate many observable behaviors. They establish high expectations around clear objectives, create structural systems to support collaboration time, ensure the sharing of research and practice, build positive and trusting relationships to promote meaningful discourse, and focus efforts on learning rather than teaching (Bouchamma, April, & Basque, 2019). In large part, these activities further exemplify what we already know about the impact on positive student outcomes when principal practices align with instructional leadership and building productive school culture. Still the facilitation of professional learning communities also engages the school leader in the practice of distributed leadership. Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, and Luppescu (2006) describe this behavior as principals “vigorously reach[ing] out to … faculty, inspiring and enabling them to assume leadership roles . . . [and] carry out leadership tasks” (p. 10). In practicing distributed leadership, principals actively participate in the professional learning communities they are working to build while also strengthening the capacity of educators within it.

Principals attending to the high-quality practice of developing professional learning communities are also charged with carefully aligning the needs of the organization with the needs of its educators to promote shared ownership (Schaap & Bruijn, 2017). Ownership is critical to facilitating the high levels of educator responsibility that increase positive student outcomes within a professional learning community and is found to impact the development of these communities (Schaap & Bruijn, 2017). Similarly, principals produce positive results for schools when they develop professional learning communities that encourage collective efficacy among all members. Voelkel and Chrispeels (2017) confirm the results of previous studies in
their finding of a strong correlation between the collective efficacy of teachers and the implementation of professional learning communities. More specifically, they find that high levels of one are associated with similarly high levels of the other. School leaders focused on the facilitation of shared ownership in the development of professional learning communities, and collective efficacy as a critical outcome, are clearly demonstrating the high-level leadership practices needed to produce student learning gains.

Strategic Management

Grissom et al. (2021) specify the strategic management of personnel and resources as the fourth key practice associated with positive school outcomes. This undoubtedly corresponds to the other high-quality leadership practices of instructional impact, building school culture and climate, and developing professional learning communities. For example, a principal’s thoughtful planning around school personnel includes not only selective hiring practices and protocols but also the assignment and retention of high-quality educators. The successful placement and retention of educators necessitates their ongoing professional development within a supportive and empowering environment. A school leader’s strategic management of other resources is critical to the success of the three previous high-quality principal practices as well – most notably, the management of time. Effective organization of time within the school environment ensures there is time to engage in activities related to the development of educators’ high-quality instruction, protects time for teams of educators to meet for the purpose of improved teaching and learning, and limits distractions so that the school community can focus on goals related to student growth and achievement (Grissom et al.).
Marzano (2006) cites previously presented arguments that successful school leadership requires the effective alignment of multiple resources. Alignment practices must revolve around the agreed on or collective purpose as expressed in the school’s mission, vision, and intended outcomes to prove successful. Leithwood et al. (2019) describe this effective leadership practice as the “allocation of resources in support of the school’s vision and goals” (p. 4). Sebring et al. (2006) speak to an ongoing cycle of using evidence to coordinate and lead the management of resources. They identify this behavior as representative of the first necessary support for substantive school reform: effective leadership. As suggested by Leithwood et al. (2004), it is ultimately the role of the leader to engage in practices that ensure all practices, systems, and other school dynamics serve to promote effective teaching and learning.

Notably, a leader’s strategic management of resources toward improved student learning outcomes requires situational awareness. That is, using one’s awareness of “the details and undercurrents in the running of the school . . . to address current and potential problems” (Waters et al., 2003, p. 6). This practice is one of the five most impactful behaviors identified by Marzano et al. (2006) in their analysis of school leaders. That is, fully and authentically understanding current reality provides a principal with the information needed to effectively manage personnel and other resources toward continued school improvement.

**Summary of High-quality Leadership Practices**

It is clear that student achievement is significantly impacted by school leadership (Grissom et al., 2021). What is sometimes less clear are the specific high-quality practices principals must demonstrate to produce positive outcomes. As argued by Leithwood et al.
(2004), if “effective leadership is critical to school reform… we need to know what it looks like and understand a great deal more about how it works” (p. 4). This call to action inspired many of the aforementioned research studies as well as the detailed report put forth by Grissom et al. regarding the impact of specific principal practices and the comprehensive meta-analysis undertaken by Marzano et al. (2006) in their identification of specific principal competencies linked to student academic achievement.

Within the four high-quality principal practices highlighted by Grissom et al. (2021), “instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate; facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; and strategic resource and personnel management processes” (p. 88), are other interrelated practices that serve to support them. In addition, the four key practices build on one another to strengthen the resulting positive impact on schools. The importance of knowing and understanding these practices cannot be understated. The information can inform more effective training and support for school leaders (Grissom et al.), resulting in higher levels of student and staff performance. Perhaps most critical for practitioners is how these practices are demonstrated: what do these practices look like in action so they can be replicated and how do different leadership styles influence or otherwise support implementation to best ensure positive outcomes?

Leadership Styles: Full-Range Model of Leadership

While school principals are charged with implementing high-quality leadership practices to promote school improvement, leadership styles are also significant for ensuring positive outcomes. Research tells us that a principal’s leadership style substantially impacts student
learning and achievement (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2013). Various models have been studied and proposed, seeking to identify specific connections between the style or manner of educational leaders and the resulting school outcomes. One such model, the Full Range Leadership Model, was developed by Avolio and Bass (1991). The model is grounded in the work of Burns (1975), who argued for a traits-based approach. Correspondingly, the Full Range Leadership Model includes specific leadership behaviors organized into three broad leadership styles: transformative, transactional, and laissez-faire.

With the exception of laissez-faire, which signifies an absence of leadership skills or actions as well as a lack of engagement in the organization’s purpose, the leadership styles identified in the Full Range Leadership Model are not finite or singular. Instead they represent a variety of different behaviors and actions that can be used singularly or in combination and can be applied in different contexts (Stafford, 2021). Why and when to use each specific style may depend on the context and the subsequent goals or outcomes that the leader has identified to accomplish. Hallinger (2003) argues that the leadership style most appropriate for one phase of a school’s improvement may not be best for the next phase and may even prove harmful. He further explains that to be most effective leaders must attend to ever-evolving needs and varying contexts, adjusting their leadership styles accordingly.

**Transformational Leadership**

Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leadership as “inspiring followers to commit to a shared vision and goals… challenging them to be innovative problem solvers, and developing followers’ leadership capacity via coaching (and) mentoring” (p.4). Leaders
exercising a transformational style demonstrate behaviors that are further categorized into four major perspectives. The first, individual consideration, reflects the leader’s focus on meeting the needs of individuals through a caring approach that includes personalized mentoring and coaching. The second, intellectual stimulation, engages the leader in the empowerment and capacity building of others. Developing new ideas and shared ownership for solutions is key. The third behavior, inspirational motivation, involves the leader in clearly defining a mission and vision that generates passion and a sense of belonging in others. The final and fourth perspective reflective of transformational leadership is idealized influence. This represents the leader’s interest in doing the right thing, high levels of integrity, and status as a role model within the school or organization (Stafford, 2021).

Transformational leadership has been found to be especially powerful in supporting the development of a collaborative school culture. For example, Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) identified six strategies used by principals to build strong authentic school cultures that reflect a shared understanding of purpose and result in positive school reform. These strategies, including “fostering staff development” and “sharing power and responsibility with others” (p. 1), were found to be associated with a transformational leadership style. Similarly, Leithwood and Sun (2012) found that a transformational leadership style positively impacts the development of conditions that promote school improvement – specifically, shared goals, instructional improvements, school culture, and shared decision making. Their work also speaks to the influence of transformational leadership on teachers’ attitudes and behaviors, finding a direct effect between those influences and positive school outcomes. Toward this end, the
transformational leader’s ability to provide individualized support while also building a system of collaboration are especially notable due to their impact on student achievement (p. 407).

Transformational leadership also yields second-order effects, as principals demonstrating this leadership style strategically and thoughtfully develop the capacity of educators to more directly influence student learning (Hallinger, 2003). For these and other reasons, transformational leadership has been identified as the style most appropriate for comprehensive school reform. Acting as change agents, principals with transformational leadership styles bring staff together around a shared vision and purpose, provide individualized and aligned support, and both inspire and motivate staff to succeed (Shatzer et al., 2013). These behaviors exemplify the idea that educators’ levels of engagement and motivation increase when provided with support to reach shared goals (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Despite this powerful reach, research indicates that a transformational leadership style does not produce the same sizable effects on student achievement as it does for building the capacity, commitment, and efficacy of staff.

**Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leaders “lead through social exchanges” (Stafford, 2021, p. 101) and maintain a more direct, managerial, and authority-driven approach toward school improvement than their transformational peers. Dynamic and productive, the transactional leadership style may be considered as functioning through two different lenses. The first, contingent reward, reflects the incentivizing of clearly defined expectations and intended outcomes. That is, school leaders articulate goals and related processes, providing support and rewards to those that follow. The second, management by exception, involves the provision of corrections or needed instruction
only when staff fail to meet expectations. These behaviors are reactive, and support is provided only in the face of failure (Stafford). While seemingly devoid of authentic engagement in the development of a shared purpose and supportive culture, transactional leadership styles do produce positive results in that they clearly identify effective principal practices and reflect behaviors associated with high levels of student achievement. These include providing learning incentives, teacher incentives, and contingent rewards (Shatzer, 2013).

In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership “focus(es) specifically on direct coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330). Not surprisingly, the transactional style of leadership and its focus on first-order changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment have been likened to the instructional leadership style. Instructional leaders “manage and control organizational members to move towards a predetermined set of goals” (p. 338). Their hands-on directive management of the instructional program is an “exchange process (of) . . . setting objectives, monitoring and controlling outcomes” (Bodla & Nawaz, 2010, p. 210). Because instructional and transactional leadership styles demand expertise and authority from the principal, they also represent deep engagement and focus on the learning process. School leaders demonstrating transactional leadership styles are goal-oriented and deeply engaged with teachers in the improvement of curriculum and instruction (Hallinger).

In addition, transactional leadership styles are essential to a stable organization (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). They represent actions related to goal setting, curriculum coordination, and teacher supervision necessary for producing positive student outcomes (Hallinger, 2013). Moreover, due to the inherently logistical nature of the associated behaviors, a
transactional leadership style may be more accessible to a wider range of school leaders. Principals can “understand and implement” the behaviors more readily (Shatzer, 2013, p. 456). Still, transactional leadership styles are not motivating or inspirational. They do not build shared authentic ownership around student success and professional development in a way that sustains school improvement efforts over time.

**Blended Leadership Styles**

Transformational and transactional leadership styles can be synergistic (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). That is, one style may augment the other (and vice versa) in ways that meaningfully improve staff experiences and performance (Stafford, 2021). Marks and Printy (2003) also argue for an integrated leadership style in which transformational and instructional leadership are used together to produce optimal results. They claim that the combination of behaviors associated with each leadership style are stronger together than they are apart. This idea rings especially true for schools on comprehensive paths to school reform. That is, to best ensure positive outcomes, the principal’s leadership style might need to shift in accordance with the needs and progress of the school (Hallinger, 2003). Staff can first benefit from clearly defined and incentivized processes indicative of the transactional leadership style before developing a capacity to problem solve and innovate around the shared vision promoted by a principal exercising transformational leadership.

Finally, the complex and challenging role of the school leader cannot be underestimated. The depth and breadth of responsibilities are significant. As the role of the leader continues to evolve and expectations for schools expand, we are reminded that the principal cannot shoulder
organizational change and improvement alone. Transformative behaviors, such as building capacity around a shared vision, are instrumental for achieving the transactional benefits of having clear goals and expectations around robust teaching and learning practices. It is the blending of both transformational and transactional leadership styles that results in an integrated leadership between staff and administration. Flexibly demonstrating transformational and transactional leadership styles allows for manageable and effective school reform efforts sustainable for both the staff and the principal.

Leadership Practices and Styles in the Building of Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities positively impact both instruction and student learning (Voelkel & Chispeels, 2017). It is, therefore, essential for school leaders to harness the power of the professional learning community model to promote systemic improvement within their schools. The significant influence of principals in making such improvements has been reinforced by the work of Grissom et al. (2021), who reveal findings that indicate above-average principals produce math gains more significant than about 70 percent of academic interventions and reading gains more significant than 50 percent of interventions, as compared to below-average principals.

Too often, principals initiate the development of professional learning communities without a full or accurate understanding of the key components and intended outcomes. They do so either of their own volition, to accomplish one or more school improvement goals, or due to directives from superiors. Both Fullan (2001) and Marzano (2001, 2003) argue that for school leaders to successfully facilitate the development of professional learning communities, they
must possess essential knowledge and understandings. A deep and comprehensive understanding of the professional learning community model, along with systemic change processes, are critical. That is, knowing how to initiate change processes while also addressing school culture is essential (Fullan, 2001).

The school leader’s need for a clear and comprehensive understanding of the purpose, intended outcomes, and key components of professional learning communities is due, in large part, to what Fullan (2001) describes as the significant role of the principal in building such a community. Marzano (2001) built on this assertion when he contended that developing professional learning communities requires understanding and skills related to ensuring positive student learning outcomes. This translation is representative of the specific leadership practices and styles aligned with effective implementation and continued maintenance of professional learning communities. High-quality principal practices and leadership styles must be well-defined and accessible for school leaders for the model to produce positive outcomes.

**Summary of Principal Practices and Styles: First- and Second-Order Changes**

The comprehensive report by Grissom et al. (2021) found that positive school results were produced by the demonstration of four interrelated high-quality leadership practices. These practices are well-aligned with the development of a professional learning community model – namely, “instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate; facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; and strategic resource and personnel management processes” (p. 88). Each practice both supports and is strengthened by the others in its effects on school improvement. In parallel fashion, school leaders must use both
transformational and transactional leadership styles to successfully implement these four high level leadership practices for the development of professional learning communities. This idea is best reflected in the interdependence between first- and second-order changes in school reform.

Second-order changes are focused on “changing the organization’s normative structure” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330) to “create a common vision, create a consensus among staff members, and inspire (staff) to accomplish the vision” (Shatzer, 2013, p. 449). They are enacted by a transformational leadership style in which leaders may exercise four perspectives and corresponding actions that best support the development of a collaborative school culture. First-order changes, in contrast, reflect a focus on “direct coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction” (Hallinger, 2014, p. 330). These behaviors are most indicative of a transactional leadership style, in which principals maintain a more direct, managerial, and authority-driven approach. Each of the four high-quality leadership practices aligned with the development of robust professional learning communities, as outlined by Grissom et al. (2021), call for efforts toward either a first-order change (best suited to a transactional leadership style) or second-order change (suggestive of a transformational leadership style) - or both.

Conclusion and Discussion

The development of schools into professional learning communities reflects a substantial effort toward critical school reform. This effort includes establishing a collaborative culture, supporting essential educator actions that address the four questions outlined by DuFour et al. (2016), and an unyielding focus on student learning. Each of these foundational elements serves
as both positive outcomes and precipitating factors in the development of professional learning communities, resulting in an ongoing cycle of continued improvement and growth.

Similarly, the intentional development of educators into high functioning teacher teams working collaboratively to ensure the success of all students is a significant intended outcome of professional learning communities. The capacity and collective efficacy of these educators is strengthened by organizational behaviors such as collaborative learning, shared ownership and leadership, and effective decision making, which are further bolstered by the educators’ resulting efficacy. Again we see that a professional learning community simultaneously impacts and reflects the behaviors and actions necessary for its own development.

Still, all of these interrelated outcomes serve a greater purpose: promoting the growth and learning of all students. Indeed high levels of student learning are the primary goal of the professional learning community model and drive the work of all who function within it (DuFour, 2016) – most notably, the school principal. We know that principals are critical to promoting professional learning community development and must therefore serve as a focus for our improvement efforts.

An exploration of impactful principal practices found that engagement in high level instructional activities, building a productive culture and climate, facilitating collaborative structures, and developing strategic management are most impactful to the success of students and staff. Of equal importance are the leadership styles that work in tandem with these practices to promote the development of professional learning communities. Using the Full Range Leadership Model as a reference, both transformational and transactional leadership styles were detailed. Flexibly and strategically employing each of these styles allows for manageable,
sustainable, and effective school reform efforts indicative of robust professional learning communities.

To best support the development of professional learning communities in a school or district, it is essential to thoughtfully examine principal beliefs, actions, and perspectives so the appropriate training and guidance can be provided. This deep dive into how principals lead and experience professional learning communities will provide information that promotes successful implementation by specifically informing the most fitting roadmap for principal leadership. In this way, student learning outcomes improve, and teacher capacity is enhanced within the context of developing a professional learning community via the intentional and strategic development of the school principal.
CASE STUDY: PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Within my current school district, both student learning data and staff survey results reflect a significant need for further direction, support, training, accountability, and feedback regarding multiple professional learning community practices. We, therefore, identified the need to work with greater intentionality toward developing our schools into professional learning communities. While our effort serves multiple goals, the primary purpose was to unite district stakeholders around effectively addressing very real discrepancies in student learning outcomes. Growing our district as a professional learning community provided an avenue to ensure high levels of learning for all students by closing learning gaps, advancing equity, positively impacting school climate (behaviors) and culture (values and beliefs), and furthering the collective efficacy of staff.

Because we know school principals are critical to the success of professional learning communities, we examined how principals lead and experience the development of professional learning communities to best promote growth. It was, therefore, imperative to explore the ways in which the principals, who serve nine public schools in a northern suburb of Chicago, articulated and acted on the professional learning community model, the role they play, resources they need, and how they measure success.
The proposed study focused on the role of the principal as critical to the success of professional learning communities by examining how principals lead and experience their development. Findings were intended to provide information and considerations that support the successful implementation of professional learning communities and more directly or specifically inform the district’s approach to their development.

DuFour et al. (2016) called for educators to engage in professional learning communities, or what they defined as a “continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it” (p. 10). They argued that educators must act on information, working “collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). Most importantly, the work of educators functioning as a professional learning community reflects three key principles: a focus on results, a culture of collaboration, and ensuring students can learn (DuFour et al.).

Key Components of a Professional Learning Community

Examination of professional learning communities reveals a wealth of different components and structures that promote varying levels of success along a range of positive outcomes. This variability among the criteria deemed necessary for the model to succeed can sometimes result in a lack of clarity. Dufour (2004) remarked that the professional learning community process has been used “so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (p. 6). Indeed educators have been known to refer to meetings, student assessments, and even
administrative templates as singular proof that a professional learning community exists. Still one might also argue that you know a professional learning community when you see it.

Because professional learning communities are a blend of processes and student learning outcomes (Stoll, 2006), the cyclical nature of a professional learning community also characterizes its components and critical structures. That is, the elements required to grow or develop a professional learning community also serve as the resulting positive outcomes that are strengthened with robust implementation. Perhaps three of the most critical structures or components representative of this dynamic, and worth exploring in the establishment of fully functioning professional learning communities, are specific to collaborative school cultures, essential educator actions, and an intentional focus on student learning. Each is reviewed below.

Collaborative School Culture

The foundation of a professional learning community rests on the “establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (Seashore, Anderson & Riedel, 2003, p. 3). Structurally, there are key pieces that promote access and opportunity for the development of this kind of school culture, such as shared planning time as well as the systems and resources needed to deliver timely and robust interventions and extensions to students. Authentic and vulnerable collaboration, however, drives the thoughtful and integrated approach needed by teams of educators to achieve success within these systemic structures.

Nehring and Fitzsimmons (2011) argue that the development of a professional learning community is best represented as a cultural journey rather than a checklist of tasks or tools. They
emphasize the purpose or meaning of the work for educators within the school or district and
distinguish significant cultural differences between conventional schools and professional
learning communities: for example, an isolated learning environment with limited reflection on
instructional practices juxtaposed to the collective and ongoing analysis of teaching and learning
data. It is this more challenging and complex evolution, driven in part by a sense of urgency to
improve learning for all students, that researchers identify as foundational to professional
learning community development.

An important distinction must be made about the focus of these collaborative efforts, as
the shared purpose instrumental to a professional learning community is a clear intent to improve
student learning rather than a coming together around procedural or managerial needs. Nehring
and Fitzsimmons (2011) describe conventional schools as primarily focused on logistic or
procedural levels of thinking. Teachers work in isolation without a sense of collective
responsibility around long-term goals that focus on student learning. These educators come
together around dismissal procedures, recess schedules, or assembly dates. Alternatively, school
cultures supporting professional learning community development reflect a relentless focus on
student learning outcomes, improved instruction and assessment practices, and a collective
commitment to shared goals. These school cultures, marked by authentic collaboration around a
shared vision that promotes student growth and learning, are those that achieve positive
outcomes for students when paired with two additional bedrocks of the professional learning
community model: essential educator actions and an intentional focus on results.
Essential Educator Actions

Professional learning communities require that educators working in a collaborative school culture around a shared vision of improved student learning participate in key actions or behaviors to achieve their goals. One of the most critical behaviors may be active participation in reflective dialogue. This kind of dialogue engages educators in collaborative analysis around factors that improve student learning. Practically, this includes the ongoing practice of sharing and analyzing student learning goals, instructional practices, assessment tools, and performance data to best meet students’ needs and ensure their success.

Newman (1996) identifies reflective dialogue as one of the five components necessary for the development of a professional learning community. Similarly, Boyd and Hord (1994) assert that collaborative reflection and discussion are critical. To be most effective, this reflective dialogue takes place within a school culture that nurtures trust, vulnerability, and urgency around a shared goal of student learning. And, fitting with the collaborative culture of a professional learning community, reflective dialogue provides a framework and method for continuous and collective reflection. This is not to suggest that the dialogue of a professional learning community has a narrow focus but rather that the dialogue’s intended outcome is clearly identified and shared by all participants.

As suggested by Sims and Penny (2014), professional learning communities must engage in reflective dialogue around all factors relevant to improving student learning outcomes. In fact, their study found that educational teams focused solely on only one indicator of student learning (such as common formative assessment data) failed to fully develop as a professional learning
community. The narrow approach of these teams left gaps in areas that substantially impacted student learning gains. Within a professional learning community, educators must participate in “rich and deep collaborative discussion of all aspects of the learning environment, teaching practices, and outcomes” (p. 44). This includes ongoing research in best practices to improve student learning, as well as continuous and collaborative questioning and problem-solving (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Further defining reflective dialogue within a professional learning community, DuFour et al. (2016) argue that collaboration among educators does not produce results unless it is “focused on the right work” (p. 59). They describe this type of collaboration as a “systematic process in which teachers work together independently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school” (p. 12). In alignment with this definition, DuFour et al. (2016) strategically identify four key questions that support the effective collaborative efforts of teams working as a professional learning community to achieve high levels of learning for all students: What is it we want our students to know and be able to do? How will we know if each student has learned it? How will we respond when some students do not learn it? How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

The essential actions of educators working collaboratively in a professional learning community to answer these four questions necessitates purposeful and reflective dialogue representative of the practices that impact school improvement (DeFour, 2004). Key actions include the development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, which serves to answer the first question, “What is it we want our students to know and be able to do?” In a guaranteed and
viable curriculum, educators collaboratively identify priority learning standards for each course and grade level and develop pacing calendars to ensure instructional time is made available to teach this prioritized content. Demonstrating a commitment to answering the second question, “How will we know if each student has learned it,” members of a professional learning community then work together to engage in the identification of high impact instructional strategies, development of robust assessments, use of student learning data to measure student progress toward mastery of prioritized learning standards, and analysis of other student outcomes to ensure success.

In responding to questions three and four, professional learning community members reflect on student learning data as well as other agreed on student indicators and decision-making rules to identify students for intervention or extension. Educators then actively support these students within a comprehensive multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that effectively addresses academic as well as social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Progress is monitored with a results orientation to determine the next steps. In this cyclical model, educators use four key questions and specific processes to collaboratively and consistently act on information to best support student learning. Their efforts are representative of the essential actions necessary for the successful development and strengthening of a professional learning community.

Focus on Student Learning Outcomes

Perhaps the most critical component to the development of a professional learning community is an intentional and universal focus on student learning. Often this requires a shift in school culture that moves away from a focus on teaching to one that prioritizes learning and
subsequently creates an urgency for educators to authentically engage in the aforementioned essential teacher actions. In establishing this renewed purpose, educators must ask themselves, “Are we here to teach, or are we here to ensure that our students learn?” (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012, p. 17). In addition, members of a professional learning community must believe that all students can learn and demonstrate collective responsibility and commitment toward affecting high levels of learning. In this way, professional learning communities function to actualize a clearly defined collective goal. (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011).

Both researchers and practitioners contend that a focus on improved student achievement is significant in the successful development of professional learning communities. Newman’s (1996) research supported this idea, finding that clarity of focus around student learning is a key component in the development of professional learning communities. Hord (1997) argued that attention to student learning is a primary indicator of professional learning communities at work. Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011) concurred with these findings and included the prioritization of teaching and learning practices as a core characteristic in their description of professional learning communities. Fullan (2001) assertively articulates this collective demand for a focus on student learning outcomes in a professional learning community model as well.

DuFour (2016) proposes that the purpose of school is to promote high levels of learning for all students and that professional learning community members are charged with focusing on student learning evidence to ensure that purpose is actualized. Correspondingly, he establishes a focus on student learning outcomes in his itemization of the three big ideas he maintains drive professional learning community development. That is, he contends that members of a professional learning community focus on learning, build a collaborative culture in which
learning matters, and maintain a relentless focus on results. This argument sets a clear expectation for success. It is not the act of collaborative and reflective dialogue alone that leads to school improvement. Instead within a professional learning community model, one must consider the focus of that collaboration (DuFour et al., 2016).

To be clear, DuFour’s (2016) argument for a results orientation does not limit educators in their collaborative and reflective dialogue and corresponding essential actions. Instead educators working within a professional learning community are charged with considering multiple factors that contribute to improved student learning outcomes. For example, student achievement results are analyzed to determine mastery of prioritized learning standards and next steps in meeting students’ specific learning needs as well as the effectiveness of contributing instructional practices. The big idea, here again, is that all educators within a school have shifted their focus to student learning outcomes and how best to positively impact those outcomes. Essential teacher actions, framed within the context of a collaborative school culture, reflect that shared focus.

Summary of Key Components

Interestingly, many of the components necessary for the effective functioning of professional learning communities are also further developed and strengthened through the work of that community. In this way, they serve a dual role of critical attributes and positive outcomes. This is certainly true for the three foundational elements detailed above: collaborative cultures, essential educator actions, and a focus on student learning. The cyclical and interrelated nature of
these key components are a hallmark of the professional learning community model, as is the substantial role of school principals.

**Intended Outcomes of a Professional Learning Community**

A growing body of research is developing to support the idea that student achievement improves when educators participate in professional learning communities. Like Hord (1997), researchers Toole and Louis (2002) also claim that professional learning communities can lead to school improvement. They describe the “mutually influencing concepts” of a professional school culture that reflects an emphasis on learning and attention to personal connection; the resulting culture is one that “makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 247). These positive effects are reflected in multiple longitudinal studies, which produce clear indicators that the implementation of data-driven professional learning communities positively impacts student achievement.

Hord (1997) describes how the work of a professional learning community reflects an inherent focus on student learning. In doing so, she explains the need for collaborative professional discourse and essential actions grounded in a shared goal of improved learning outcomes for all students. Strongly emphasizing the connection between the development of educators and positive student learning outcomes, she calls for teachers and administrators to engage in continued cycles of learning and application toward improved instructional practices that benefit students. And, to further define the ongoing collaborative, intentional, and action-oriented work of educators toward improved student achievement, she suggests the alternative term “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (p. 10).
Additional research supports the idea that student achievement improves when educators participate in professional learning communities, in a large part due to the aforementioned development of a collaborative culture and improved teacher effectiveness that positively impact school functioning. Rasberry and Mahajan (2008) argue that when schools meet criteria for successful implementation of professional learning communities, both instructional practices and student performance improve. Referencing research conducted by Louis and Marks (1998), as well as Hord (1997), Rasberry and Mahajan assert that educators working as professional learning communities learn and apply improved instructional practices and student learning tasks that result in improved student achievement scores.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) report the positive impact of teacher collaboration on student learning within their own correlational studies of professional learning community practices (p. 36). For example, they reference an increase in the number of students moving from off track to on track to graduate in schools implementing professional learning communities. They identify a student-centered approach of collaborative educators working in cycles to assess and respond to students’ learning needs, an essential educator action within a professional learning community model, as a key contributing factor. Lee, Zhang, and Yin (2011) reference similar research, including an analysis of 11 studies that support the impact of professional learning communities on teachers’ practices. They highlight the role of PLCs on achievement. They assert that the idea of schools working as professional learning communities is largely accepted by both educators and researchers due to the numerous findings that the model results in positive student learning gains.
Perhaps most notable for educational practitioners, DuFour et al. (2016) strongly advocate for the development of professional learning communities as a way for schools to improve teacher practices and achieve substantial student achievement gains. In their argument for implementing this significant reform model, DuFour et al. define a professional learning community as a “continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it” (p. 10). Educators engage in professional activities such as identifying a guaranteed and viable curriculum with common criteria for determining mastery of specific standards, administering common formative assessment aligned to those learning goals, and using the resulting student learning data to inform improved practices for all students and among all team members. These intentional and essential actions on behalf of educators working in a professional learning community model are designed to positively impact the growth and learning of all students.

Summary of Intended Outcomes

As the aforementioned researchers and practitioners have established, collaborative efforts toward improved student outcomes within a professional learning community model benefit the growth and learning of educators. Working in a professional learning community provides opportunities for educators to learn from one another so they can further develop their practices – more specifically, engaging in the essential educator actions of analyzing student data to identify effective instructional strategies, participating in collaborative articulation to ensure shared understanding and clarity around student learning objectives, and learning from the
success or failings of colleagues regarding curriculum development, instruction, and assessment promotes teacher development.

Still most educators and educational researchers agree that the intended primary outcome of professional learning communities is not the development of educators in and of itself. Instead the development of educators as skillful and active professional practitioners is an “intermediate capacity-level outcome” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 228) that grows in tandem with a collaborative school culture to serve a much larger purpose – namely, improving student achievement. Stoll et al. mirror the assertions of Hord (1997) when they explain that professional learning communities are intentionally designed to improve teacher practice for the benefit of students. To further articulate the fundamental or primary purpose of professional learning communities, they also reference the work of Bolam et al. (2005). They contend that professional learning communities exist to advance student learning, with the growth and learning of educators as a necessary support.

This more student-focused and servant-oriented interpretation is the foundation of the professional learning community model and drives the work of all participants. That is, educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research in a professional learning community to achieve better results for the students they serve. The ultimate and most critical intended outcome of functioning professional learning communities is high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2016).
Organizational Behavior and Educator Capacity in a Professional Learning Community

In addition to the intended outcomes and key components of a professional learning community, both organizational behaviors and educator capacity influence and are impacted by its development. That is, specific organizational behaviors help grow a professional learning community and are then reinforced or further strengthened by its success. Similarly, building the capacity of educators is instrumental to developing a professional learning community; continued engagement in the practices of a professional learning community also supports capacity building. The reciprocal and reinforcing relationship of organizational behavior and educator capacity within a professional learning community is important to explore in defining the ongoing work and supporting conditions necessary for its development.

Organizational Behavior

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) speak to the significance of organizational behaviors in enhancing the growth and development of professional learning communities. They maintain that professional learning community members working in a community of practice participate in a culture that builds shared understanding, common language, and belonging. This culture includes provisions for autonomy and empowerment, which lead to greater motivation and accountability for educators to engage in the essential actions of a professional learning community (Kilbane, 2009). Correspondingly, collective responsibility for student learning emerges as a construct instrumental to the success of the professional learning community model.
Organizational behaviors that reflect a collaborative and collective interest in learning on behalf of the educators in it are those that lead to improvements in student learning. This is not to say that collaboration alone, as an organizational behavior, is enough to engage educators in professional learning. Only collaborative behaviors that reflect collective responsibility, reflection, and efficacy within a professional learning community model serve to improve teacher practices and, subsequently, positively impact student achievement (Kennedy & Smith, 2013). For example, educators who engage in ongoing and collaborative cycles of collective inquiry and action research with the goal of ensuring high levels of learning for all students demonstrate the organizational behaviors indicative of a professional learning community.

In thinking about the successful development of effective organizational behaviors reflective of a professional learning community, the work of Underwood, Mohr, and Ross (2016) is relevant. They focus on leadership behaviors and effectiveness, arguing that leadership quality significantly impacts the success of an organization. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) also address organizational behaviors within the context of leadership. They explored the impact of district-level organizational behaviors on school-level leadership and the connections between these influences and student achievement. Results indicated that a leader’s level of effectiveness directly and significantly impacted a district’s culture, focus on student achievement, and the instructional quality of the educators within it.

These authors further assert that district leaders can build collective efficacy among school level leaders by engaging in behaviors that “emphasize the priority they attach to achievement and instruction, provide targeted and phased focus for school improvement efforts, and . . . build cooperative working relationships with schools” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p.
Behaviors such as these were linked to student achievement via the development of collective efficacy and attributed almost entirely to organizational actions rather than the personal characteristics or experiences of the leaders themselves.

**Educator Capacity**

DuFour (2016) proposes that school improvement is the result of capacity building and the best way to build capacity is through professional learning communities. Capacity building, in this context, represents the development of an educational team’s collective belief in a shared ability to positively impact student learning. DuFour argues for the importance of capacity building by claiming that schools are only as good as the professionals working in them. He references Fullan’s (2010) stance that collective capacity is essential for school reform. Authentic engagement in the intended work of a professional learning community is a means for generating this collective capacity, which serves to promote student growth by continuing to inform improved decisions and practices.

Zonoubi, Rasekh, and Tavakoli (2017) explored educator capacity in their investigation of professional learning communities. Their work highlights how collective teachers’ beliefs and sense of belonging to the school or district community impact student learning. As the outcomes of their study suggest, teacher motivation, commitment, and efficacy is positively impacted by the development of professional learning communities. These factors, in turn, contribute to improved student performance. Zonoubi et al. also cite Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000), as well as Bandura (1997), whose combined research tells us that increases in collective teacher efficacy (teachers’ perceptions that the efforts of the faculty have a positive effect on
students) result in corresponding increases in staff motivation and performance and their students’ learning. Consequently, the collective values and beliefs of staff are essential to nurture when pursuing high levels of learning for all students.

Kennedy and Smith (2012) address the relationship between organizational culture and efficacy within a professional learning community. Here, again, efficacy is an essential behavior in functioning professional learning communities in that educators must work collaboratively in cycles of collective inquiry and research to achieve better results for the students. Kennedy and Smith cite numerous sources to confirm the link between teacher efficacy and student achievement, arguing that a greater understanding of efficacy sources should serve to inform organizational behaviors that improve both teacher practice and student outcomes.

From this organizational standpoint, DuFour et al. (2016) contended that developing systems and structures with clear and specific processes builds the capacity of educators to work collaboratively toward improved teaching practices. This, ultimately, results in student learning gains. Likewise, Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) propose that developing systems and structures with clear and specific processes serves to build the capacity of educators to work collaboratively toward improved teaching and learning practices. In parallel with these organizational processes, capacity building also requires shared leadership. Ho, Ong, and Tan (2020) argue that to build educator capacity toward the successful development of professional learning communities, school and district leaders must provide educators with “clarity and alignment through strategic direction and supporting structures, while simultaneously enabling the distribution of leadership to teachers” (p. 635). That is, the development of collective teacher
efficacy and corresponding leadership structures inherent to a successful professional learning community requires the sharing of influence or ownership.

**Summary of Organizational Behaviors and Educator Capacity**

The interwoven impact of professional learning communities on organizational behavior and educator capacity cannot be overstated. Professional learning communities foster, support, and reflect both effective organizational behaviors and robust educator capacity, while also requiring their continued development for educators to fully and successfully participate. Moreover, organizational behaviors indicative of a professional learning community serve to build the capacity and collective efficacy of educators while the reverse is also true. Educators working in a professional learning community use their capacity to further grow and establish organizational behaviors that help achieve their goal of improved outcomes for all students. Here, again, is a demonstration of how professional learning communities are not a means to an end but rather an ongoing process of school improvement (DuFour et al., 2016). Professional learning communities simultaneously impact and reflect the behaviors, beliefs, capacity, and practices of the educators within it.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The development of schools into professional learning communities reflects a substantial effort toward critical school reform. This effort includes establishing a collaborative culture, supporting essential educator actions that address the four questions outlined by DuFour et al. (2016) and an unyielding focus on student learning. Each of these foundational elements serve as
both positive outcomes and precipitating factors in the development of professional learning communities, resulting in an ongoing cycle of continued improvement and growth.

Similarly, the intentional development of educators into high functioning teacher teams working collaboratively to ensure the success of all students is a significant intended outcome of professional learning communities. The capacity and collective efficacy of these educators is strengthened by organizational behaviors such as collaborative learning, shared ownership and leadership, and effective decision making, which are further bolstered by educators’ resulting efficacy. Again we see that a professional learning community simultaneously impacts and reflects the behaviors and actions necessary for its own development.

These interrelated outcomes serve a greater purpose: promoting the growth and learning of all students. Indeed high levels of student learning are the primary goal of the professional learning community model and drive the work of all who function within it (DuFour, 2016) – most notably, the school principal. We know that principals are critical to promoting professional learning community development and must therefore serve as a focus for our improvement efforts.

To best support the development of professional learning communities in a school or district, it is essential to thoughtfully examine principal beliefs, actions, and perspectives so the appropriate training and guidance can be provided. This deep dive into how principals lead and experience professional learning communities will provide information that promotes successful implementation by specifically informing the most fitting roadmap for principal leadership. In this way, student learning outcomes improve and teacher capacity is enhanced within the context
of developing a professional learning community via the intentional and strategic development of the school principal.

Methods

The purpose of my qualitative research study is to examine principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the development of professional learning communities in a suburban school district north of Chicago. Five research questions served to frame the study. Principal interviews were administered, and responses were reviewed to inform next steps.

Research Questions

To explore the ways in which principals in this school district articulated and acted on the purpose of the model, the role they play, resources they need, and how they measure success, the research questions were as follows:

1. How do principals define professional learning communities? What do they believe are the purpose and intended outcomes of this model?
2. How do principals believe professional learning communities are developed? What skills, knowledge, and practices are needed? What roles do they believe participants play?
3. What preparation, training, and resources do principals believe are needed in the development of professional learning communities?
4. How do principals describe their past and current experiences developing professional learning communities? In what ways do they believe they embrace, resist, or lead development?

5. How do principals measure the development of professional learning communities? What evidence do they identify? In what ways do they respond to their findings?

Description of Site

Research took place in Maple School District #32, a public school district located in a northern suburb of Chicago, Illinois. It is a medium sized (between 2,500 and 5,000 students) district that serves early childhood through eighth grade. It is important to note that one of the elementary schools is a school of choice and dedicated to the implementation of dual language programming for students in grades K-5. Additionally, there is one off-campus school shared with neighboring districts. This school houses preschool programs for students at-risk and those with special needs. Additional details regarding the district are below. The data are indicative of the 2018-2019 school year, as the impact of COVID-19 on subsequent school years (to the present) may prove difficult to interpret.

Maple District #32 is tax-capped, and the financial capacity is funded at 79%, which places the district in Tier 2 of the evidence-based funding model. The per pupil expenditure rate is $13,000, and we earned recognition for our financial profile designation of 3.9 (the highest category of financial strength). Our student population is relatively diverse. Approximately 44% of our students are White, 26% are Hispanic, 23% are Asian, 5% are two or more races, and 2% are Black. With regard to English language learning, approximately 24% of our students do not
identify English as their primary language. In fact, over 60 different languages are spoken in the district. Approximately 15% of our students have an Individualized Education Plan, and our Hispanic students are consistently over-identified for these services. Our district had recently been granted monies to begin funding the training and support needed to correct this response. Approximately 28% of our students qualify as low income.

Students’ standardized assessment scores reflect discrepancies across the district as well as pockets of low learning levels compared to surrounding and/or similar districts. In the fall of 2019, for example, our kindergarten and first grade students participated in FastBridge earlyReading and earlyMath screenings. The median percentile score varied wildly from school to school. Between buildings, the median percentile score in earlyReading ranged from 69 to 29, and the median percentile score in earlyMath ranged from 76 to 45. Similarly, the school achievement percentiles per school in MAP (administered to students in grades two through eight) reflected significant discrepancies. One of our schools scored in the 94th percentile on the Fall 2019 reading MAP assessment, while another scored in the 46th percentile. Student growth data (the number of students who met or exceeded their individual growth projections) and conditional growth measures also demonstrated variance. The resulting scores were dissimilar both between and within schools, in that grade level teams within a school and across the district achieved disparate results. Math metrics reflected greater consistency between and within schools, due to the recent rebooting of our Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum in preschool through eighth grade along with the adoption of a new foundational resource in grades kindergarten through fifth.
Participants

Research participants included nine building principals from Maple School District #32. All participants were their late twenties to early fifties and from varying religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the participants were veteran educators and experienced administrators, with a minimum of 10 years as principals at Maple. Others had one to four years of experience in principalship, all of which had taken place in the district.

Data Collection Procedures and Interview Questions

Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 80 minutes. Interviews took place in person or via Zoom at a time convenient for the participant and were audio recorded and later transcribed. The same questions were used for each interview, although some unique follow up questions or inquiries for the purpose of clarity were also posed. During the interview, principals were asked to define key concepts and ideas as well as describe exemplars of effective professional learning community components. The principals were also asked to share their experiences with professional learning communities and reflect on the possible perspectives of others with regard to their work in developing the model. In addition, the principals were asked about their own learning, successes, and challenges with regard to professional learning community processes. Interview questions are detailed in the appendix.

Role of the Researcher

While the principal participants and I are all administrators, I am also one of their
supervisors. I have formally evaluated five of the principals and served as an administrative mentor to one. With regard to this hierarchy, I am an outsider to them. Still there are many ways in which I am also an insider. I previously worked with one of the principals in a different district. He and I were principal colleagues for years and share some similar professional experiences, and we have a friendly and trusting relationship. Another one of the principals and I share a similar cultural background and forged a positive relationship immediately upon my start in the district. We consider each other trusted confidants and valuable supports and often collaborate on projects.

As a former middle school principal, I share some common professional experiences with the two middle school administrators. Further, one of these principals and I demonstrate some similar work habits and preferences. Within the last year or so our relationship has strengthened, our communication is collaborative, and we have a successful partnership. Finally, one of the elementary principals and I started our work in the district at the same time, so this experience has resulted in some similar understanding and discoveries.

I do hold assumptions and biases about the topic of principal leadership, specifically about the role of the principal in developing professional learning communities. As a teacher, I experienced two wildly different building administrators achieve drastically different results. In addition, I have served as a building administrator in three different buildings and two different districts. A key initiative in both districts was the development of professional learning communities, and as a principal, I did take a very active and direct role in coaching educators toward their development. I know that I will need to be especially careful about respecting the principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the development of professional learning
communities in my current district.

While I consider myself to be more of an insider with the principals and more similar than different in terms of our aforementioned personal and professional circumstances, it is critical that I think about my responses to each of the participants’ contributions as both an insider and an outsider. To best work what Fine (1994) described as “the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others” (p. 33), it will be best to heed the words of Craig Centrie and engage in non-judgmental listening (Weis & Fine, 2000).

Data Analysis Approach

Each principal interview was recorded and transcribed, and then an open coding method was used to flexibly categorize themes or concepts. The practice of not predetermining specific codes in advance helped me take a fresh look at the transcripts. Moreover, multiple coding cycles were used to further refine patterns, which brought improved clarity and objectivity around the definitions that best reflected the data.

Gutierrez and Rogoff's (2003) cultural-historical approach of considering each participant as an individual, despite any perceived similarities or differences in the cultural backgrounds between participants and/or between me and a given participant, served as an important guide. I know that my interpretation of what is important, along with my interpretation of the data itself, was vulnerable to subjectivity and bias. In addition, I worked to avoid generalizations in favor of each participant’s contribution and perspective (Lughod, 1993) and increased my awareness of real or perceived cultural differences between myself and each participant as well as any competing cultural differences within the group of participants.
Results

To gather information about the actions, beliefs, and perspectives of principals around the development of professional learning communities, nine school leaders from a public school district in a suburb of Chicago were interviewed. The principals’ insights and reflections around purpose or intended outcomes, lessons learned from past experiences, development steps and strategies, the role and needs of the principal, and how success is measured regarding the development of a professional learning community were all carefully examined. The results were then used to inform consideration and next steps to further develop professional learning communities within the district’s schools. Several themes emerged from coding, and each are discussed below.

Purpose of a PLC: Promoting Student Learning

Student Learning

Seven of the principals interviewed for this study consistently associated student growth and learning with professional learning communities. This connection was shared most often when principals were tasked with defining a professional learning community. One principal explained the process as “a systemic approach by the organization to work collaboratively to ensure high levels of learning in all areas for all students.” Another identified a professional learning community as educators working to “ensure more students [are] understanding and learning.” The principals also referenced student growth in their descriptions of exemplar professional learning communities. One noted that these teams make sure “students [are]
learning together at high levels,” and another shared that an indicator of a highly effective professional learning community is a team’s “focus on student learning.” She further explained that these teams “look at students by name and need” and make sure “every student is growing from where they started.”

When asked for the primary purpose or intended outcome of a professional learning community, six principals prioritized student growth and learning. Those who identified student learning as the primary intended outcome made clear and unequivocal purpose statements such as “its ultimate purpose is student learning.” These principals shared that the actions of a professional learning community are foundationally grounded in improving student achievement and may also result in additional benefits such as increasing teacher efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. Their perspective was best surmised by one principal’s assertion that “student learning is the core of what we’re trying to do” or, as another principal remarked, “if there’s no change to student outcomes, then what’s the point?”

Three of the principals emphasized intended outcomes different from student learning, such as how professional learning communities serve to build “connectedness” among colleagues and “improve teacher craft.” These principals focused on collaborative culture as necessary for the development of a professional learning community as well as a critical outcome. In different ways, these principals shared that a collaborative culture fuels feelings of trust and belonging among staff. Two of the three principals further connected culture with “truly answering the four PLC questions and … how teachers are learning from one another.” For these principals, the four questions inherent to professional learning community processes were identified as both its purpose and definition.
Multiple Outcomes

As stated, the growth and development of educators were also identified as an intended outcome of professional learning community development. In fact, improving the skill and instructional prowess of staff members, developing cohesive systems or structures reflective of professional learning community practices, and improving staff collegiality were all repeatedly referenced as positive outcomes. One principal’s characterization of professional learning communities as having “endless benefits” is representative of the team’s overall analysis, although some variability in each resulting outcome and the significance each principal attributed to those outcomes existed between them.

In speaking about the impact of professional learning community development on the improvement of teacher skill and learning, one of our veteran principals explained:

We are also looking at our teaching and our instruction and talking about what worked for this teacher and why, and being vulnerable to say, ‘This didn’t work.’ It’s helped build a lot of trust in our staff to help have more difficult and vulnerable conversations with each other. It’s helped make them better teachers.

Similarly, one principal noted that the focus of a highly effective professional community is, in part, on “growing the competencies of teachers.” She argued that a professional learning community’s shared ownership and efforts toward improving student growth and achievement are more powerful in teacher development than administrative appraisal or feedback due to the “natural level of accountability that’s more genuine” and “makes the team stronger.”

What this teacher improvement looks like was less clear. One principal emphasized the importance of “everybody teaching the same course or content or standard.” For this principal, consistency in student learning goals or outcomes was an indicator of educator proficiency
derived by participation in a professional learning community. A different principal described the growth of teachers working as a professional learning community as reflected in their ability to “intervene, extend, and enrich the GVC [guaranteed and viable curriculum].” She spoke about these teachers “know[ing] what data they’re looking at” and “brainstorming anything they can to help kids learn.” Her colleague mirrored this language, sharing that working as a professional learning community allows teachers to “intervene or enrich” rather than “keep going with the unit or cycle and really not meeting the students with what they need.” In this way, their description of teacher growth and development intentionally moves beyond consistency in standards. A hallmark of instructional improvement for these principals is the team’s ability to collaboratively respond to the needs of students.

Much like the idea that professional learning communities promote improved instructional practices via the team’s collaborative efforts, some principals spoke about how the development of professional learning communities results in systems and structures that support student achievement. For example, when describing the positive outcomes of building a school into a professional learning community, one principal cited the importance of knowing “how… to work together collaboratively to ensure best results for students and continually improve instructional practices.” This principal identified the establishment of “systems . . . to help [students] achieve goals” and known processes for teams to follow in reaching success. This theme was replicated by a colleague, who noted that in a professional learning community “there’s a plan and everyone on the team knows what to do, who’s implementing, how [they’re] assessing.”

The relevance of systems and processes was referenced by principals not only as an
outcome of the development of professional learning communities but also a necessary building block. One principal noted that a revision to her teams’ report cards contributed to their success as a professional learning community, as did the improved multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). She asserted that “building toward a common goal in an organized way” with a clear focus and mindset resulted in her teams “growing leaps and bounds” and that support was derived by “everybody working in the same system.” At least four other principals also noted how procedures are reciprocally built with professional learning communities to ultimately improve student learning. Drawing on the critical role of MTSS in answering the four questions posed by a professional learning community, one principal stressed the need to “make sure there are steps to support students at either end of the spectrum and in between.”

Finally, all nine principals spoke to collaboration and collegiality as either an essential prerequisite and/or a positive outcome of professional learning communities. One principal remarked, “If we don’t have a collaborative culture, it will make the process very difficult. Trust, collaboration, and teamwork are essential to moving forward with the PLC process.” Similarly, another principal noted that staff working together as a professional learning community need “the collaborative piece first.” This idea was expanded on by a third principal, who explained that staff need a “healthy culture and climate so they can have open conversations, trust, (and a) safe space (because) teams need to be collaborative, they need to work together.”

In describing an exemplar professional learning community, two principals spoke with some detail about how trust and vulnerability serve to improve “the work of collaboration” among team members and, correspondingly, student learning. One of these principals shared that her strongest professional learning community is “not afraid to ask for help… they will come to
the administration, interventionists, our MTSS Team, speech therapists, and our social worker to brainstorm anything they can to help kids learn.” She further identified this team as having developed a level of collegiality that results in “more of a responsibility on every staff member… to help every student learn.” Her colleague described an exemplary professional learning community in a similar way. In her view:

They understand that the students they work with are all of their students and they have a responsibility to meet the needs of all students… they have a strong collective responsibility for student learning and for each other and pushing each other to be better.

This emphasis on a shared responsibility for the learning of all students was further explained by the first principal as grounded in a professional learning community having “so much trust in each other that they are not afraid to be vulnerable . . . to help meet (student) needs.”

Learning from the Past: Deep Understandings and Authentic Beliefs

Deep Understandings

All principals interviewed for this study clearly articulated their own lack of understanding about professional learning communities or their lack of understanding about their teams’ proficiency levels as an obstacle in their previous efforts toward developing schools and teams into high functioning professional learning communities. More specifically, four principals shared how their own lack of understanding impeded progress, four principals identified their misunderstanding of how much their teams understood, and two referenced both as significant barriers to success. This knowledge gap, as explained by one principal, included understanding “what a high functioning PLC is, what it looks like, what all members of the PLC should be
doing, and how students are receiving supports from it.”

When describing a significant mistake regarding the development of a professional learning community, one veteran principal shared his experiences in a previous district. He said, “I don’t think I had a good enough understanding of where to start and pull everyone together . . . Instead of fully understanding what a PLC was, I tried to implement bits and pieces . . . We didn't have the foundation, so it just became a mess.” Adding insult to injury, he noted that his teams also lacked a basic understanding of and interest in the process of becoming a professional learning community. He half-joked, “I don’t think the school was at a place to do some of that work. They were very angry about the air conditioning if I recall.”

A newer administrator shared a similar perspective. Reflecting on her time as a teacher, she shared, “As much as I was trained in it, or taught about it, I don’t think I really understood what it was we were doing.” Subsequently, as an administrator, she believes she may have missed the mark. She explained, “I think I jumped over a process or two . . . thinking I know, but I don’t know.” Her colleague shared a similar sentiment, noting that when she was a teacher, “we didn't know what we were doing.” She later described the process of reaching this realization as an administrator and having to “start at the beginning [as] frustrating.” Indeed both of these principals seemed to communicate that they brought misconceptions and/or limited levels of understanding from the classroom to the principalship, thereby thwarting their initial efforts to develop professional learning communities in their schools.

Conversely, one principal reported already knowing that her own level of understanding about professional learning communities lacked depth. Upon her entry into the district, she was told by some of her new administrative colleagues and teacher teams that they “already knew
about” and “already did PLCs,” so she relied on these groups to guide her. She shared, “Because it was all new to me, I kind of took a backseat.” However, as her knowledge of professional learning communities began to grow, her stance changed. She explained, “Once I learned more (about professional learning communities) I realized we are not where we think we are. Self-evaluation is not an accurate representation.” In citing her most significant mistake in developing her school as a professional learning community, she professed, “We could be farther along. I was assuming more understanding, competence, than what was there . . . I didn't really understand where my teams were and what they needed.”

A colleague echoed this sentiment. When speaking about his initial efforts toward developing his school into a professional learning community, he shared, “As I came in, I probably didn’t spend enough time analyzing and understanding where staff’s understanding of the process was at. This created a wider gap from the beginning.” One principal described this same misstep with an example. He remarked, “Staff believed we were working in a PLC . . . we were using the language but applying it to the idea that once in a while we would meet to decide what field trip we would go on.” Another summarized the obstacle by simply remarking, “The issue I’ve observed is everyone has a different understanding of what a PLC is.” In their view, the diverse definitions and interpretations of professional learning communities throughout the district resulted in the lack of deep and meaningful conceptual knowledge needed to fully understand the purpose and engage in the practices.

**Authentic Belief**

Along with a lack of understanding around the purpose and practices of professional
learning communities, at least three principals spoke directly about the tandem role beliefs play in their successful development. One principal acknowledged:

I don’t think anyone was clear on if this (professional learning communities) was going to stay, so I didn’t attend as many meetings as I should have, didn’t put focus on it as I should have. Now that I have a deep understanding of it and know the importance of it, I have a different perspective.

This principal’s belief in the sustainability and impact of professional learning community processes was just as important as her understanding of the idea. A “foundational belief in the system, that this is the vehicle to move students forward” was critical for her. She identified her first, somewhat dismissive, response as resulting in a lack of accountability for both herself and her teams and cited this as her most significant mistake in developing her school into a professional learning community. As one of her colleagues shared, you “have to believe in PLC. It’s hard to get behind something you don’t think is valuable.”

A second principal spoke quite candidly about her initial lack of belief in the positive impact of professional learning communities. She explained, “Not necessarily understanding or buying into it probably go hand in hand. If I understood it, I would buy into it.” She went on to share that her work toward developing practices reflective of a professional learning community had been “unfocused because I’m not really trusting the process.” Now on the other side of this belief system, she feels more equipped to successfully launch her teams into a deeper understanding of the purpose and practices of professional learning communities. With greater confidence and ownership, she asserted, “It’s my job to show them the why, and it’s my job to believe in the why.”
Assess Current Reality

As previously stated, five of the principals identified misunderstandings or misconceptions about their teams’ understanding of professional learning communities as an obstacle to success. Correspondingly, they reported that an essential step in the development of professional learning communities was to clearly and accurately assess the related knowledge, proficiencies, and actions of their teams. One principal remarked, “If I spent time better understanding where staff were at, I could have created a better plan.”

While a specific process for gathering critical information about each team’s current reality was not defined, principals spoke to the importance of determining “where [your] building is on a continuum of development toward PLC.” Toward this end, they shared general suggestions for how building administrators might engage in this work. Examples from five of the principals included “understanding the individual in the organization,” “listening and reflecting on where each team is,” “asking their knowledge of PLC,” “surveying the staff to see where they are,” “doing a SWOT analysis,” and “observing what’s going on currently.” Most of these methods rely on the principal’s ability to accurately identify and assess the understanding and actions of team members as related to some measure of proficiency.

Once these data are secured, the big idea shared by four principals was that a responsive plan might be generated to support targeted and ongoing development. One principal clearly stated that data reflective of current reality should be used to “put together a plan to move each team toward the goal.” Others spoke in more general terms about “determining next steps,”
“devising a plan,” and “determining action steps.” One principal noted that this process must include an opportunity for teams to understand their own current reality. She remarked, “It’s hard to get a team to move forward if they don’t know where they are. They have to know where they’re at.” Notably, this description of current reality would come from the principal’s assessment rather than the team’s own analysis.

Reflecting on how a principal might find the process of confronting the brutal facts about their teams’ current proficiency levels to be overwhelming or intimidating, one administrator offered, “Some of it is not going to look good. A principal shouldn’t let the idea of wanting it to look perfect stop (them) from making progress.” In this way, assessing current reality is seen as a possibly defeating, but necessary, step toward continued improvement. A second principal spoke to this as well. He shared, “Once you have identified (current reality), you don’t need to slow everyone down… the process differentiates itself.” In his view, action planning around the development of professional learning communities is inherently flexible. It allows a principal to use the strengths and needs of each team to guide next steps.

**Build Leadership Capacity**

A second step that all nine principals identified as essential in the development of professional learning communities was building leadership capacity. Toward this end, some of the principals specifically referenced their Guiding Coalition. In their district, the Guiding Coalition is a group of staff members in each building who typically meet bi-monthly with building administration and are assumed to serve in a leadership role. One principal specifically called for the need to “develop the coalition team [and] empower those individuals to send a
message out to the rest of the learning organization.” He said, “You can’t run a PLC by making
top-down decisions, you’ve got to have collective commitments… ensuring everyone has an
opportunity to provide feedback.” A colleague echoed this vision of developing a teacher
leadership group to serve as a conduit between administration and staff. He described the
Guiding Coalition as “empowered to take it [professional learning community practices] back to
each of the teachers… infuse it to the rest of the staff.” To be most effective, he said, a principal
needs to “identify strong people to empower and build trust [with] . . . you can’t be in charge of
everything.”

Six of the principals spoke to the importance of teacher leaders in a different way. For
them, capacity-building was less about helping to communicate and promote a principal’s
message and more about shared leadership focused on student needs. One principal called for “a
strong leadership team committed to the results for students” and another mentioned that each
team might have more than one leader serving different roles. While the idea that principals
“cannot do it by themselves” was also voiced, the goal identified by this group was for building
administrators to “ultimately be the guide on the side to support and be another voice in a PLC.”
They committed to the idea that professional learning communities “shouldn’t only operate
because of the principal.” Instead teachers should “lead with mission and vision.” As one
principal shared, “We’re all leaders together, [we should] let them take the lead, too.”

How to develop such a leadership team, as well as the primary actions or responsibilities
of that team, were less clear. One principal emphasized the “need to be able to promote shared
leadership,” another remarked that a principal needs to “start with the leadership teams and your
leaders,” and a third spoke a bit about “delegating and empowering individuals.” One of the
principals went so far as to say that if a professional learning community is “going to be successful, [principals] have to be able to get out of the way.” The big idea was certainly distributed leadership rather than a single source of guidance or authority. Yet, as one principal disclosed, “I think you need that kind of [shared] leadership . . . [but] I would have loved to have seen a Guiding Coalition team in action. I had a really hard time wrapping my head around what a Guiding Coalition was and how that impacted a PLC.”

GVC and MTSS

Along with an assessment of the current reality and building leadership capacity, at least seven of the principals spoke to the need for a guaranteed and viable curriculum (GVC). A guaranteed and viable curriculum is one in which content addressed in specific courses and grade levels is identified and there is enough available time to teach that important content. The guaranteed and viable curriculum also serves to answer the first question of a professional learning community: What do we want all students to know and be able to do?

To successfully develop a professional learning community, one principal shared, “People have to be crystal clear on question one. If someone is slightly off on that, the whole rest of the process is compromised.” He clarified, “Question one is most critical.” A second principal also emphasized the importance of the first question and the significance of the “GVC work” that the district has undertaken. In thinking about how to work with teams toward the development of effective professional learning community practices, he said, “The most important question, to me, is the first question. Where’s your GVC?”

Other principals spoke to the need for a guaranteed and viable curriculum when working
to build professional learning communities, as well. One indicated that a principal would need to “make sure there (was) a GVC” and/or the “ability and resources to develop and ensure a GVC.” He explained, “the idea of learning for all should be at the core of what we’re talking about.” Two colleagues spoke to the impact that a recent reboot to the district’s guaranteed and viable curriculum had on their ability to move professional learning community practices forward. When asked what helps promote development, one principal responded, “We started having a GVC. That has been successful.” Similarly, a less seasoned principal shared her recommendation for new administrators to “start with question one and really understand what that is.” She shared, “I do think you need to have a GVC or some type of (response to) question one… the GVC is hugely beneficial and helpful.”

While a guaranteed and viable curriculum serves to answer the first question of a highly functioning professional learning community, a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) aligns well with questions three and four: How will we respond when students don’t learn? and How will we extend for students who already demonstrate mastery? Six principals identified a comprehensive and robust MTSS as a component in the successful development of a school and its teacher teams into a professional learning community. While this was addressed or described in different ways, consensus seemed to be around a need for systems and strategies to meet diverse student needs.

The principal who spoke most specifically and thoroughly about MTSS in promoting the development of professional learning communities called for “systems in place to help [students] achieve goals without a lot of struggle.” He further described the need to “establish systems of supports for students” and “make sure there are steps to support students at either end of the
spectrum.” Referencing the work he is currently engaged in with teams, he emphasized their focus on generating “systemic practices to intervene on either end quickly in areas [students] need to make growth.” By “either end” he spoke to the need to either intervene or enrich and extend, depending on the student and targeted skills. This is the hallmark of questions three and four in the work of a professional learning community.

Other principals identified the need for MTSS more generally, referencing the function of a professional learning community in meeting the diverse needs of all students. As one principal shared, “It allows us to intervene or enrich, and that’s really what the students need.” One colleague shared, “For students who didn’t learn what was expected, there’s a plan and everyone on the team knows what to do” and another asserted, “How are we intervening? How are we enriching? That work . . . [is] how we’re impacting student learning.” These principals seem to point to MTSS as a significant strategy used by a professional learning community to promote student learning. One principal surmised, “I think MTSS was super successful because [we are] building toward a common goal in an organized process.”

**Time and Training**

The importance of time was emphasized by six principals. Most often, this translated to common planning time strategically built into the daily schedule for educators to collaborate as a professional learning community. Principals referred to this as “dedicated time” and praised our district for ensuring it is in place. One described this logistical element as “the biggest thing teachers complain about” when it is not available and another as “other districts’ biggest hurdle to overcome.” The intentional scheduling of plan time between grade level or grade level
department colleagues, defined by a principal as “time for professionals to work together,” was
demed a necessary and foundational resource for professional learning communities to thrive.

Moving beyond time on the clock, these principals also spoke to how this time was to be
used. One principal clarified, “When the logistical time is there, it’s dedicated to what it needs to
be dedicated to.” A colleague clarified, “Once you have [common team plan time], it allows you
as a building leader to direct it.” What, specifically, the time might be dedicated to ranged from
systemic planning to more narrow instructional protocols. One principal spoke to the need for
time to establish mission, vision, and commitments, while another called for time to discuss
learning standards and targets. A third principal noted the importance of using this time for teams
to analyze data, student work, and rubrics. Generally speaking, the use of time was referenced as
an element that demanded “clear expectations and protocols” and served, in part, to “show
teachers the importance of [professional learning communities].”

Two principals noted that time must also be used to support staff in learning about
professional learning communities. One remarked that staff needed “time to learn what a PLC
is,” while another suggested that staff “invest time and energy in learning about this.” In fact, the
need for staff to develop an understanding of professional learning communities was addressed
by all nine of the principals. While the details of who would plan this training or professional
development as well as how it would be implemented or facilitated remained largely absent from
the conversations, the big idea was that a strong and foundational understanding of professional
learning communities among all staff was essential for its success.
One principal’s description of the need for staff to develop a common and foundational understanding of professional learning communities reflected the contributions of her colleagues. She said:

They need the understanding or the knowledge about PLC. What is it, what does it look like, why is it beneficial. The why is always important. The why, why is this going to benefit us, how does it benefit students . . . To me it’s clear why we do it, but it is important that everybody understands the why.

A colleague echoed this sentiment when she said staff must know what professional learning communities “might look like, feel like, sound like.” When speaking about the “why” of a professional learning community, a third principal emphasized the importance of each educator understanding how a professional learning community “will make me a better teacher, how it will help instruction, how it will help my students, and how it will make sure we have growth for every single child and growth for our teachers, as well.”

These and other ideas of staff learning about professional learning communities were often framed as systemic or shared. Comments such as “a global understanding” or “everybody working the same system” and “all focused on understanding the same things” spoke to the principals’ emphasis on the collective whole. Still, and as stated, the methods for generating this cohesive learning differed. One principal celebrated our district “taking the journey together with a foundational resource,” referencing our district-wide book study. Another spoke more pragmatically about the learning process, suggesting that concepts should be “broken down into manageable pieces” so one might “model what you’d like to see, give [staff] the ability to try it on their own, reflect on their own growth, and try again.” A third mentioned that collective learning might be accomplished via “on the spot coaching” and “checking on (team) documents.”
Role of the Principal: Variability in Perspectives

Perhaps the greatest area of variance among the insights, experiences, and reflections shared by the nine principals were those detailing their own role in the development of professional learning communities. When asked to share three words to describe the role of a principal, responses ranged from “fun” to “a lead learner.” Four of the principals identified more affective responsibilities, such as the need for a principal to be supportive, trusting, motivating, encouraging, a listener, and understanding. Three principals presented a more active stance, identifying the role of the principal as a vision-setter, facilitator, learning partner, problem solver, change-agent, and instructional leader. Two principals shared a combination of both passive and active responsibilities when describing the role of a principal. Across the 27 words or phrases provided, two principals used “facilitator,” two used “collaborator,” two used “visible,” and three shared that the role of a principal is to be a “learner” or be “learning.”

One defining role that seven principals articulated in the context of their current work was what the first four principals described as maintaining focus on the practices and processes of a professional learning community and the remaining three described as limiting distractions to the work. As one principal shared, “What I intend to continually do a better job [of] is staying clear when all the other noise enters throughout the year; to make sure I am not letting the noise get in the way.” Her colleague argued that a principal must serve as an “obstacle remover” who “gets rid of some of the other noise as much as possible so the work is focused and we can do it really well.” Perhaps the most direct was the principal who stated:

The role of the principal is to take away any other noise from the staff so they can focus on their efforts with the four questions . . . I think you have to continuously remind
people what the mission and goals are, and how we’re going to work together to make that happen because, if not, you lose focus very quickly.

In these cases, “noise” seemed to refer to any other needs, projects, or events that would pull teams away from a focus on student learning and/or using professional learning communities as a vehicle to ensure learning for all.

Upon reflection, one principal shared that her staff “grew leaps and bounds in comparison to other districts because of focus.” She attributed this to a “PLC mindset.” A second principal also attributed the district’s progress toward the development of professional learning communities to focus. He shared, “In the last three years we’ve had a laser-like focus not only on implementing [professional learning communities], but also the professional development we’ve received focused on student learning.” A veteran principal asserted, “Every year we get stronger and stronger, and more focused on our PLC process.” This need for a principal to demonstrate focus in the development of professional learning communities, and actively eliminate real or perceived distractions, was nearly universally identified as a key role. Other responsibilities generated more divergent thoughts and opinions.

Additional contributions shared by the principals about their role in the development of professional learning communities included providing feedback, “knowing what’s happening” in meetings, and having “crucial conversations.” Two of the principals spoke to the need for ensuring clarity and three referred to the setting of expectations. Details around the specific processes or practices around which clarity and expectations might be developed were not explicitly outlined. That said, three principals shared that their role is, or should be, one of a coach. In these and other descriptions, there are hints that the development of professional learning communities demands leadership, guidance, and oversight.
Principal Needs: Three Big Ideas

Intentional Focus

Throughout the interviews, five principals emphasized the importance of creating and maintaining an intentional focus on the development of professional learning communities as critical to its success. Three others made remarks that supported this assertion. For example, one principal connected success to being “super tight as a district” around the development of professional learning communities and another shared that “the entire district moving in the same direction [has] really helped me understand what a PLC is, how you get there, and why it’s important.” This idea of a collective district-wide movement as representative of a focused approach that promotes success was clearly articulated, and the essential ingredient of this intentional focus was referenced by most of the principals as sourced by district leadership.

One principal cited the district’s “laser-like focus not only on implementing [professional learning communities], but also the [related] professional development we’ve received” over the last three years as “helping [him] understand what a high functioning PLC is, what it looks like, what all members of the PLC should be doing, and how students receive supports from it.” A colleague echoed this sentiment when she shared that a critical element in the successful development of professional learning communities is, in part, the “leadership of the district.” In describing the more recent shift in our district’s approach, she said:

It’s very clear that PLC is our vehicle for school improvement, it is how teachers work together to improve student learning and their craft. It’s not something we’re doing for one year - it is part of the teaching profession.

From her perspective, clear and focused messaging around how the district approaches learning
and defines the role of an educator makes a significant impact around expectations for participating in professional learning community practices.

One principal described this vision as “prioritization.” She shared that leaders in the district office are instrumental in, “communicating the importance of the work and . . . being able to provide the focus . . . so that the work is focused and we can do it really well instead of feeling like you’re doing little things and not getting the bigger piece done.” A veteran principal took this one step further, asserting that once professional learning communities are identified by district leadership as a focus for the district, “every department (at the district level) needs to understand their role and how they can support it.” He described attending GVC development sessions hosted by the district’s Teaching and Learning Department, during which “the tenets of PLC are brought up as to why we are doing the work.” Drawing on this experience, he said, “Wherever you go in the district, the idea of learning for all should be at the core of what we’re talking about. You need to make sure that . . . what it means to be a PLC, that’s the focus, that’s the goal or the vision so that you can achieve the vision.”

Three principals acknowledged they also play a role in bringing intentional focus to the development of professional learning communities. The first reflected on how her previous lack of focus was a misstep. She shared, “I didn’t put focus on it as I should have. Now that I . . . know the importance of it, I have a different perspective.” Moreover, she reported that the single grade-level structure of her current school was “a gift” in that she is able to “focus on one grade [rather than] six grade levels with six sets of standards.” She attributes the ongoing development of professional learning communities within her school to her better “focus[ing] the building . . . everyone is working on the same goals.”
A second principal also spoke to his role as a school administrator in providing intentional focus. He described the necessity of having “a commitment from [school] leaders, and staff, and the community that it’s valuable to be a PLC” and highlighted the importance of working with his staff to ensure “we [are] all focused on understanding the same things” with regard to professional learning community practices. A third principal, describing how she might counsel a new school administrator, shared that this leader would “really have to focus on why we exist, and have that as a priority . . . a constant priority that PLC is a vehicle to reach our goals.” She went on to describe the need for a new principal to design “a vision or goals around student learning” that would serve as a focal point or driving force for school teams.

Still, the big idea expressed most often by the principals was perhaps best summarized by the principal who remarked, “moving together as one . . . helps us get more traction than we’ve had in the past. It’s more supportive as a leader [and] feels more supportive for the teachers engaging in it.” Like many of her colleagues, she emphasized the work of district level leaders in “being intentional [as] a way to keep [professional learning communities] as the focus.”

Professional Development and Learning Materials

In addition to an intentional focus, principals identified the benefits of both formal training and a variety of related professional development materials in supporting their efforts toward successful implementation of professional learning communities. In the most practical sense, this included both people and artifacts that serve to promote principals’ learning and subsequently help nurture the growth of professional learning communities in their schools. At least three principals also referenced the time needed to take advantage of these resources. One
shared the importance of “setting aside time” for learning, and another said, “I’m all about the resources, but it’s really about having the time to dive into [the resources].”

All nine principals mentioned professional books, articles, videos, and/or conferences as valuable tools in their growth and development. When asked how he best learns about professional learning communities and what resources a new principal would need if charged with implementing them at the school level, one principal stressed the importance of “continuing to consume information.” This was further defined by his colleagues, five of whom endorsed formal training opportunities via conferences or coaching for principals. Referencing a former district leader, one principal shared, “We convinced the superintendent that it was a good idea to send the administrative team to a PLC summer conference at Stevenson.” The training sessions at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, were mentioned by at least two other principals as an effective source of professional development. Stevenson is the home of Rick DuFour, co-author of Learning by Doing: A Handbook of Professional Learning Communities at Work.

Correspondingly, four principals specifically identified Learning by Doing: A Handbook of Professional Learning Communities at Work as instrumental to their learning. When describing essential reads, one principal shared, “Obviously DuFour’s Learning by Doing; I would refer to it as the Bible.” Another explained that DuFour’s work is a “great way to start” learning about professional learning communities. Our district-wide book study focused on this text was further noted as a source of professional learning for these principals and was connected to the big idea of moving together as a district toward the successful development of professional learning communities across our system. As one principal explained, “taking the journey
together with a foundational resource” supported both his own learning and the learning of his teams.

Other principals shared more generic descriptions of needed resources, such as “books or other materials to read up on and be more knowledgeable (about)” and “there’s been a lot of good videos that I’ve tried to use.” A principal relatively new to her role described a folder of resources that had been jointly created by a district administrator and educational consultant for review and exploration. She acknowledged, “I know the [folder] may be overwhelming for individuals, but I like the collection of things because it gives me an idea of how I can add this or add that.” She explained that the availability of relevant tools or other artifacts to peruse and select from on her own time and at her own pace was well-aligned with her learning style.

Three principals highlighted training provided by the aforementioned educational consultant as another helpful source of learning and development. One of the principals described the impact of this consultant as “a huge win for us.” He explained, “The professional development we’ve received through Solution Tree has helped me understand what a high functioning PLC is. You’ve got to have the right training system-wide.” Another shared that she also “learned a lot” from this consultant and the resources he provides. A critical piece for her was that this consultant functions as a partner to the district rather than an employee of the district. She reflected, “Someone from the outside is helpful … someone who is able to take a step back and look at the context [they are] not living in is objective and important. It’s more helpful coaching when [the coach] is not ingrained in the system.” A second principal agreed with her, sharing that it is helpful to have training and support from “someone who understands it, but is outside of the organization’s realm.”
In considering additional ways to effectively promote the growth and learning of principals working to develop their schools or teams into professional learning communities, six principals identified the power of observing professional learning communities in action. Two principals described their experiences visiting a neighboring school district known for hosting fishbowl opportunities for teams seeking to learn more about the practices of professional learning communities. Both valued the invitation to “actually go in and see how they were doing it and establishing it” or, as one principal explained, “see what it should look like [so I could] implement that.” Others spoke to opportunities for observation within our own district as worthwhile. One principal shared, “I think the best way [to learn] is through my colleagues and seeing some examples of exemplary processes.” A veteran principal referenced one of his colleagues by name, suggesting that it would be valuable to see this principal in action by observing him at his school.

A third principal spoke in greater detail about how she might use the information gleaned from collegial observations to improve her understanding and subsequent efforts. She explained that she would consider “what’s working, what’s not . . . evaluate [the observation] and go back to the text and videos to see what it should look like [to then] implement that.” Her interest in using observation in conjunction with other professional learning resources to inform practices was mirrored in the comments of a colleague. This second principal shared that while she had attended training sessions about the role of teacher leadership teams in the development of professional learning communities, she “would have loved to have seen a [teacher leadership team] in action . . . I had a really hard time wrapping my head around what a [teacher leadership
team] was, and how that impacted a PLC.” Seeing such a team function, in real time, would have been a helpful supplement to her training and better informed her work as a school leader.

During the interview process, some discussions naturally allowed for inquiries about how district leaders might best meet the learning needs of principals working to further develop their schools and teams into professional learning communities. In response, three principals referenced the coordination of professional development experiences. One principal described the purpose of these experiences as “making sure all administrators are on the same page and have clarity in the process.” Similarly, a second principal described the need for district leaders to provide training for principals as important toward ensuring “consistency in expectations” among all administrators, and a third principal explained that administrative training served to promote “a global understanding of what [professional learning communities] are.” She emphasized the importance of all administrators “working in that same system.” For these three principals, the role of the district office in establishing clarity and consistency regarding expectations and understandings is an essential “first step.”

Four principals spoke to the role of district administrators in directly providing assistance to school principals. One shared that district leaders would be most helpful using the experiences they have to serve as “a mentor or coach.” Another noted that district leaders “checking in” with principals to listen to “any stumbling blocks or barriers . . . [and presenting] solutions to get through those barriers” would support learning. Two principals spoke specifically about the need for district administrators to ask, “What can I do to help you?” One explained that members of the district office also responding to requests for assistance “makes this process [of developing professional learning communities] work.” She shared, “I don’t feel it would be admitting
failure. If I’m asking for help, it’s because I really need help.” The big idea here is that district leaders must both proactively reach out to principals to provide support as well as actively respond to requests for assistance to improve the capacity of school administrators.

Principal PLCs

Perhaps most fitting in the principals’ articulation of needs associated with their work toward the successful development of professional learning communities was a call to participate in a professional learning community of their own. At least five principals identified opportunities indicative of participation in a professional learning community, and these were described as essential to their growth and development. In alignment with the learning approach outlined in Learning by Doing: A Handbook of Professional Learning Communities at Work, one principal shared, “The best learning for me is meeting with the teams and going through the process with them.” Likewise, a colleague stated, “I really think what you have to do is be in . . . those PLCs, to see it in action, because you can read about it but unless you’re doing it.” These ideas were perhaps best summarized by the principal who asserted, “The best way to learn is to just do it. Dive down and work through it.”

These principals explained the importance of partnering “doing” with “collegial conversation.” One principal touched on this when she shared that “talking to other colleagues both within and outside of the district that have experience with PLC, just having that collegial conversation, is how I’ve learned best.” Her colleague built on this idea, suggesting that school administrators continue to connect with colleagues for the purpose of engaging in dialogue such as, “Here’s what’s happening in my PLC. What’s happening in your PLC?” She shared that
participating in these conversations as well as “setting aside time to talk through the process with someone [who will] report back to you about things in a nonjudgmental way” helps deepen one’s knowledge of professional learning communities and improve professional practice.

Two of the principals shared more personal experiences to emphasize their interest in participating in a professional learning community with their administrative colleagues. The first divulged that she and a colleague have been collaboratively planning in a focused way that has produced “more important conversations.” She remarked, “If I had done this earlier, we could have gotten a different result.” The second principal credited two of her colleagues for “really opening my eyes on what is a really good PLC, and what is a work in progress.” She described a time when she struggled with a concept and eventually admitted such to her colleagues, sharing:

I was a little afraid to say that. I knew I didn’t want to say that. I put myself out there and asked for help. You have to be vulnerable because you have to learn. Otherwise, you’re not setting anyone else up for success.

This principal stressed the importance of working with “people who are willing to help other people,” as well as “putting [your]self out there and asking for help” when learning and implementing professional learning community practices.

These contributions were not unlike those of a colleague, who suggested that principals must have opportunities and support to demonstrate vulnerability. She shared that principals “need to be able to ask questions, admit to mistakes, and . . . be reflective” as they move through the process of learning about and subsequently developing professional learning communities in their schools. Ultimately, as one principal asserted, administrators “need their own PLC, which is a resource; other colleagues they can go to in supporting the work.”
Measuring Success: Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators

Quantitative Indicators

When asked how to know if a professional learning community is successful, all nine principals identified student learning outcomes as one such indicator. Three responses were more general, such as the principal who shared, “If your students are successful, that shows we’re successful in this” and the principal that said success is measured by, “seeing improved student outcomes.” While student success and outcomes were not clearly defined, the context lent itself to a quantitative measurement of student learning. Two principals referenced student achievement data as a benchmark for success. Specific assessments were identified, such as unit assessments, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR). One of these principals explained that “student achievement information [would] show that the process worked and kids are moving forward.” That is, an unspoken threshold of proficiency and/or a longitudinal analysis of proficiency levels on one or more of these assessment measures would serve as an indicator of highly effective professional learning communities in action.

Four principals emphasized student growth as a key indicator of success in the development of professional learning communities. As one principal argued, “If [students] are not making progress, then it’s not being successful.” This principal was clear that her analysis focused on each student as an individual and went beyond measures of proficiency. She remarked, “It’s not just proficiency, it’s the growth of every student; making sure every student is growing from where they started.” One of these principals spoke specifically about growth
both in and beyond academic areas. He explained that success would be measured by “student learning results in all areas; academic, social, emotional, and behavioral . . . growth for all and the elimination of any sort of gap for any reason.” In his description, he also referenced the need for student growth to be demonstrated over time or “consistently, year after year.” For these principals, “high levels of learning for all students” included analysis of both student proficiency and growth measures.

Qualitative Indicators

A number of qualitative indicators for success were identified by principals in their description of effective professional learning communities. Three principals shared that having a goal with a corresponding plan is indicative of success, and two others added that knowing or using the four questions reflective of professional learning community practices are also important. One principal remarked, “An exemplar PLC is going to set goals.” She went on to say that when a student doesn’t learn what is expected, “there’s a plan and everyone on the team knows what to do.” A colleague shared that success lies, in part, with “asking people what the four questions are and they know . . . [they] could clearly articulate the process in a quick analysis.” Similarly, one principal noted that an indicator of success is when “we are able to answer the four questions with ease.” These principals connected a team’s sense of clarity regarding processes and practices reflective of a professional learning community to their level of success.

Two principals built on the significance placed on process by sharing that effective professional learning communities “monitor themselves” as they work to meet agreed upon
goals. Further, these teams “run smoothly without you [the principal] being there.” Inherent to this idea is that a successful professional learning community is one driven by its own sense of responsibility. One principal explained, “they want to [operate as a professional learning community] because they know that it’s helping their kids.” Her colleague shared that effective professional learning communities “have a strong collective responsibility for student learning and for each other and push each other to be better.” She said, “They understand that the students they work with are all of their students, and they have a responsibility to meet the needs of all students. They bring their best selves to [do] that.” A total of four principals spoke to this sense of collective responsibility, or what one principal described as:

All hands on deck . . . not bound by, “I’m on this team or that team.” We do what have to (in order) to intervene, remediate, or enrich to meet the needs of students. It’s not only the classroom teacher who’s responsible for that child.

Three principals described a successful professional learning community as one in which educators collaborate and learn from each other. These comments were fairly general in nature, although one principal did specify that having a “clear understanding of how we’re going to work together collaboratively to ensure best results for students and continually improve instructional practices” is key. Two additional principals spoke to trust as an indicator of success. One explained, “(members) have so much trust in each other that they’re not afraid to be vulnerable . . . not afraid to ask for help . . . anything they can to help kids learn.” For these principals, the essential teacher actions of a highly effective professional learning community are made possible by feelings of mutual trust among its members.
Discussion

Recall that the goal of the study was to examine principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the development of professional learning communities in a suburban school district north of Chicago. The principals in this study identified both student growth and learning as well as multiple other outcomes as the purpose of professional learning communities. These additional outcomes included the growth and development of educators, developing cohesive systems or structures reflective of professional learning community practices, and improving staff collegiality. Still, six principals emphasized student learning as the primary or ultimate goal of professional learning communities. This connects with what researchers tell us about the more student-focused and servant-oriented interpretation of the professional learning community model, which is to positively impact student learning; the development of educators is a secondary benefit (Stoll et al., 2006). Working to ensure a strong foundational understanding of the ways in which the development of professional learning communities serve to promote the skill and professional practices of educators would act as a helpful next step. This learning allows principals to more intentionally provide for and monitor these improvements.

Both Fullan (2001) and Marzano (2001, 2003) argue that for school leaders to successfully facilitate the development of professional learning communities, they must possess essential knowledge and understandings. A deep and comprehensive understanding of the professional learning community model, along with systemic change processes, are critical. This idea aligns with the feedback provided by the principals in this study, all of whom cited a lack of understanding as a significant obstacle in their previous efforts toward developing schools and
teams into high functioning professional learning communities. Four principals shared how their own lack of understanding impeded progress, four principals identified their misunderstanding of how much their teams understood, and two referenced both as significant barriers to success. This knowledge gap, along with a lack of belief in the sustainability and impact of professional learning community processes, was identified by the principals as a barrier and/or mistake in their work.

Building on this idea, it is worthwhile to explore the impact of a principal’s conviction that all students can learn how they embrace, resist, or lead practices inherent to professional learning communities. Four principals referenced the importance of this foundational understanding in their ability to move forward in the development of professional learning communities with purpose and authenticity. As one principal shared, “We [principals] need to believe all students can learn, and it is our responsibility to ensure that they do.” Given that the primary purpose of professional learning communities is to promote the growth and learning of all students, it might be hypothesized that a critical belief inherent to a principal’s success would be the understanding that all students can, in fact, learn and grow.

In sharing the knowledge, skills, and practices essential to developing teams and schools into professional learning communities, the knowledge principals deemed as most critical is seemingly simple: that is, the aforementioned clarity and shared understanding of foundational concepts. As one principal explained, it is essential to know and understand “what a high functioning PLC is, what it looks like, what all members of the PLC should be doing, and how students are receiving supports from it.” Deep and meaningful conceptual knowledge is needed to fully understand the purpose of professional learning communities and engage in the practices.
In speaking of key practices, the principals in this study identified the importance of assessing current reality, building leadership capacity, establishing a guaranteed and viable curriculum and a multi-tiered system of supports as well as ensuring time and training. We know that essential educator actions are a critical component of professional learning communities, and educators need both a guaranteed and viable curriculum and a multi-tiered system of supports to effectively engage in those actions. Educators use the four key questions and specific processes to collaboratively and consistently act on information to best support student learning. Similarly, research supports the idea that capacity building is essential for effective school reform (Fullan, 2010). Authentic engagement in the intended work of a professional learning community is a means for generating this collective capacity, which serves to promote student growth by continuing to inform improved decisions and practices. Professional learning communities foster educator capacity while also requiring its continued development for educators to fully and successfully participate.

With regard to principal skills that may best promote the development of professional learning communities, four principals identified a need to maintain focus on the practices and processes of a professional learning community, three emphasized limiting distractions to the work, two spoke to the need for ensuring clarity, and three referred to the setting of expectations. These contributions mirror some of the essential actions emphasized by Bouchamma, April, and Basque (2019), in that the researchers identified establishing high expectations around clear objectives, creating structural systems to support collaboration time, ensuring the sharing of research and practice, building positive and trusting relationships to promote meaningful discourse, and focusing efforts on learning rather than teaching. Similarly, some of the
aforementioned skills shared by the nine principals relate to the four high-quality principal practices highlighted by Grissom et al. (2021): “instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate; facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; and strategic resource and personnel management processes” (p. 88).

Not all of the needed leadership skills identified by the principals in this study were directly attributed to the role of the principal. That is, the skills and behaviors deemed essential for the development of teams or schools into professional learning communities and the corresponding leadership styles that serve to enable their existence were not universally presented as within the nexus of the principal’s control, scope of responsibility, and/or resultant of their intentional actions. In fact, the greatest area of variance among the insights, experiences, and reflections shared by the nine principals were those detailing their own role in the development of professional learning communities. Some of the key leadership practices and styles the principals identified were seemingly assigned to others, such as district office administrators. Schaap and Bruijin (2017) argue that ownership is critical to facilitating the high levels of educator responsibility that increase positive student outcomes in a professional learning community. Exploring what this ownership looks like for school principals, along with their essential roles and responsibilities in the development of professional learning communities, may serve as a helpful next step.

The principals in this study identified an intentional focus as well as a number of resources and other materials to support their preparation and training as related to the development of professional learning communities. Perhaps the most congruous request in their articulation of needs was a call to participate in a professional learning community of their own.
At least five principals identified opportunities indicative of participation in a professional learning community, and these were described as essential to their growth and development. Actively engaging in the work of facilitating professional learning community development; sharing and learning from the successes and missteps of their peers; demonstrating vulnerability; and participating in professional reflection to improve on practices were some of the important ways principals determined they might contribute to their own professional learning community. These behaviors are also associated with key components of a professional learning community itself – namely, collective culture, educator actions that include reflective dialogue, and a focus on student learning outcomes.

Research tells us that the ultimate and most critical intended outcome of professional learning communities is high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2016). The development of educators as skillful and active professional practitioners is an “intermediate capacity-level outcome” (Stoll et al. 2006, p. 228) that grows in tandem with a collaborative school culture. Bolam et al. (2005) contend that professional learning communities exist to advance student learning, with the growth and learning of educators as a necessary support. Correspondingly, the principals in this study measured the development of professional learning communities with both quantitative and qualitative criteria. All nine principals identified student learning outcomes as one such quantitative indicator. Two principals referenced student achievement data as a benchmark for success, and four principals emphasized student growth.

A number of qualitative indicators aligned with improved educator practice were identified by principals in their description of effective professional learning communities. Three principals shared that having a goal with a corresponding plan is indicative of success, and two
others added that knowing or using the four questions reflective of professional learning community practices are also important. Two principals built on the significance placed on process by sharing that effective professional learning communities “monitor themselves” as they work to meet agreed upon goals, and three described a successful professional learning community as one in which educators collaborate and learn from each other. Two additional principals spoke about trust as an indicator of success. For these principals, the essential teacher actions of a highly effective professional learning community are made possible by feelings of mutual trust among its members. Determining the best way to identify and measure these qualitative indicators, as well as defining more finite quantitative metrics, may promote greater clarity and access to data needed for principals to authentically participate in a professional learning community of their own.

Researcher Reflections

Throughout the study, I maintained a heightened awareness of my dual role as both researcher and supervisor. While I considered myself to be more of an insider with the principals due to similarities in some of our personal and professional circumstances, this may not have been their perspective. In addition, a number of professional experiences have informed my own knowledge, skills, and biases about principal leadership with regard to the development of professional learning communities. This impacted my objectivity, which was also influenced by interactions with the nine principals prior to the start of this study. That is, I already possessed information and held assumptions or beliefs about the actions each principal takes toward our district’s goal of becoming a professional learning community. During the study, I consistently
and deliberately worked to cultivate an open mind. I also curbed my instinctive response to actively correlate and evaluate the information principals were sharing to produce viable solutions for our team. Instead, I strove to maintain a more objective approach focused on data collection and what Craig Centrie described as non-judgmental listening (Weis & Fine, 2000).

From an evaluative lens, it was initially difficult for me to disassociate a principal’s response with my subjective assessment of their work toward developing teams into professional learning communities. For example, if a principal I believed had made great gains in promoting key practices among their teams shared a specific action step, I had to avoid considering this step as correct or indicative of an effective way to develop professional learning communities. The reverse was also true. Correlating my perceptions of principal performance with the feedback they provided throughout the study was a barrier to my objectivity that I actively worked to resist. Similarly, it was a challenge to not consider and plan for how to adjust or increase individualized support, training, and professional partnership based on the information each principal shared. My instinctive helping behaviors and desire to think strategically about our work as a district were difficult to set aside as I learned more about our principals’ actions, experiences, and beliefs.

As the researcher, I intentionally engaged in multiple coding cycles for the purpose of reaching deeper levels of objectivity. My continued concern was the subjective identification of themes or ideas that matched my own thoughts or assumptions rather than a more organic analysis of the information shared. Throughout the coding process, I also continued to consider how the principals’ responses were impacted by my dual role. This was particularly true when reviewing responses that indicated my efforts in the district had been helpful to their work. Was
this feedback authentic? My attention to this dynamic was also triggered when principals spoke to the contributions of our superintendent and other district level administrators. I wondered if some of the principals felt compelled to positively acknowledge the efforts of our district office and considered whether the principals who shared more neutral messages were trying to indirectly communicate that something more or different was needed from specific members of this team. The actions of our superintendent were universally praised, and this educator is my direct supervisor.

At the conclusion of the study, I was left with a number of questions that fell somewhat beyond its scope or intent and proved more specific to our school district. For example, three principals highlighted training provided by an educational consultant as a particularly helpful source of learning and development. It seemed important to these principals that the consultant was “outside of the organization’s realm.” I continue to wonder about this, as it may call into question the establishment of trust, reciprocal learning, and internal experts within our own system. Similarly, in speaking about their needs, the principals shared three big ideas: intentional focus, professional development and learning materials, and a professional learning community of their own. Throughout these and other conversations, the role of district level leaders in providing for these needs was emphasized over the initiative, collaboration, and skill of school administrators. It is unknown what may be contributing to this dynamic and is worthy of further exploration and reflection by members of both the school and district level administrative teams.

Another question involves the variability found in principals’ descriptions of their own role. When asked to share three words to describe the role of a principal, responses ranged from “fun” to “a lead learner.” Four of the principals identified affective responsibilities, three
principals presented an active stance, and two shared a combination of both a passive and active role. While a principal’s need to maintain focus or limit distractions when working to develop teams into professional learning communities was identified as essential by seven principals, other responsibilities generated more divergent thoughts and opinions. There were hints that the work demands leadership, guidance, and oversight from the school administrator. If we accept that district leaders build collective efficacy among school level leaders by engaging in behaviors that “emphasize the priority they attach to achievement and instruction, provide targeted and phased focus for school improvement efforts, and . . . build cooperative working relationships with schools” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 496), we must determine how our district leaders can improve on these behaviors to better promote consistent and shared efficacy among school leaders. This may include better recognizing and responding to the varying strengths, needs, and knowledge that different principals possess so that differentiated support is provided.

Study Strengths and Limitations

Due to its qualitative nature, this study provided authentic insight into the experiences, interests, perceptions, and thoughts of participants. Individual interviews provided time to better explore and understand each participant as well as to pose some unique follow up questions or inquiries for the purpose of clarity. All nine principals in the district consented to the interview, which was another strength of the study. Meaningful and fitting plans may be developed in accordance with their specific needs and feedback. In addition, multiple coding cycles better ensured that the themes identified to represent the participants’ collective responses reflected a more organic and objective analysis of the information shared.
Limitations of the study include the small sample size, as results may be less applicable or relevant to different readers, and the absence of quantitative data to support analysis. Similarly, qualitative interviews are dependent on the comfort, honesty, and communication style of each participant. Perhaps a more significant limitation, however, was my dual role as both researcher and supervisor. This duality, along with my own knowledge and opinions about principal leadership and the role of principals in developing professional learning communities, may have unintentionally interfered with an accurate analysis of results.

Future Directions for Research

As stated, at the conclusion of the study I was left with a number of questions that fell somewhat beyond its scope or intent. To begin, I wondered about the desire for an outside educational consultant to help guide and support the development of professional learning communities. Why is this particular support of interest and is there evidence to suggest that the strategy is impactful? Also, the role of district level leaders was emphasized over the initiative, collaboration, and skill of school administrators. This dynamic is worth further investigation and reflection. Likewise, it may be valuable to determine how district leaders can further develop consistent and shared efficacy among school leaders. One hypothesis is that better recognizing and responding to the varying strengths, needs, and knowledge that different principals possess so differentiated support is provided would prove effective.

Concluding Remarks

Six themes emerged in studying principal actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the
development of professional learning communities in a suburban school district north of Chicago. Key ideas included the significance of a universal understanding and authentic belief in the purpose of professional learning communities, essential steps in building professional learning communities, as well as the need for intentional focus, professional development, and a professional learning community specifically for principals. Perhaps the greatest area of variance among the insights and experiences shared by the nine principals were those detailing their own role in the development of professional learning communities. Similarly, how best to measure their success produced a diverse set of responses. These findings are intended to provide information that supports successful implementation of professional learning communities and more directly or specifically inform my district’s approach to their development via the intentional and strategic advancement of the school principal.
PAPER 3

PROMOTING PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
COMMUNITIES: ALIGNING ACTIONS AND BELIEFS
WITH INTENDED OUTCOMES

Principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives around the development of professional learning communities were gathered and carefully examined in this study. Several themes emerged. Findings and recommendations have been organized into a series of eight professional development presentations for district level leaders, the purpose of which is to inform the further development of professional learning communities within the district’s schools. The primary audience is district level administrators in my current school district, as this team has the responsibility for and capacity to guide the work of the nine school principals interviewed for this study. Ideally, the presentations should be delivered during a full day retreat intended for administrative learning and subsequent planning around key ideas.

Module One

Although a series of presentations will be shared with the leadership team, the first module was created for the purpose of this dissertation. This module begins with an overview of my study, including a strong emphasis on the purpose – that is, the findings from the study provide information and considerations that support a principal’s successful implementation of professional learning communities and more directly or specifically inform my district’s approach to their development. This deep dive into how principals lead and experience
professional learning communities allows us to more intentionally and strategically develop the school principal. The results provide a roadmap for supporting our principals’ leadership in the successful development of our teams and schools into professional learning communities. Details around the research methods and role of the researcher are also provided, in an effort to provide context and further ensure transparency. Special attention is paid to my reflections as a researcher, especially those that highlight any barriers to objectivity.

A quick start professional development session focused on high-quality leadership practices and leadership styles within a full-range model of leadership is also provided during the first module. The purpose of this session is twofold: 1) to ensure a common understanding of the impact of school principals on school achievement and other critical outcomes and which practices relate to the most positive results and 2) to allow for the influence of context in identifying and developing the effective leadership styles that principals must employ to successfully implement these four high level leadership practices toward the development of professional learning communities. High-quality principal practices and leadership styles must be well-defined for all to support consistent implementation.

A summary of several themes that emerged from the coding process are then shared. These themes reflect principals’ actions, beliefs, and perspectives related to the development of professional learning communities and include the purpose, past experiences starting at the beginning, the role of the principal, principals’ needs, and ways for measuring success. Subsequent modules target each of these themes. That is, the outcomes from the study are detailed via an outline of the key ideas supported by direct quotes from the participants. Any connections to relevant literature or research are also provided. Recommendations for needs and
next steps that correspond with each theme are presented, along with a series of facilitative questions to guide district administrators in the process of reflection and planning.

Throughout the retreat, district administrators are tasked with detaching any assumptions or preconceived ideas about their perceptions of our current reality in favor of deeply understanding and appreciating principal feedback. They are also asked to consider the presented recommendations and carefully develop corresponding action plans. This necessitates coming to consensus around goals, responsibilities, processes, and timelines. In addition, the team may elect to either adopt or develop walk-through tools and “look for” criteria along a structured proficiency scale, as well as differentiated plans to best meet the diverse needs the principals presented. These efforts require skillful collaboration and resource allocation. At the conclusion of the retreat, district administrators are presented with additional questions identified by the researcher and asked what remaining questions they may have. The team must then determine if, when, and/or how these questions may best be addressed.

As new principals are onboarded to the district, it may become necessary for the district administrative team to review their previously developed action plans in determining how to best provide support and strategic training. Variables to consider include the principal’s experiences and skills in developing professional learning communities, as well as the specific goals, responsibilities, processes, and timelines that the team identified throughout the course of their collaborative planning session. Ensuring a new principal’s strong, foundational understanding and authentic belief in the purpose of professional learning communities, as well as the essential steps in building professional learning communities, will be key. Similarly, coordinating a new
principal’s participation in an administrative professional learning community should serve as a critical support.

Intended Outcome

The intended outcome of this leadership retreat, beyond an understanding of the qualitative data collected throughout the course of the embedded research study, is a comprehensive plan to promote principal development of professional learning communities. This deliverable may call for an intentional articulation of and solicitation for feedback around any proposed plans with relevant stakeholders, primarily the school level administrative team. Much like professional learning communities themselves, the collaborative work of these teams toward continued improvement is likely to simultaneously impact and reflect the behaviors, beliefs, capacity, and practices of the educators within it. In this way, the intentional and strategic development of school principals as leaders in the growth of professional learning communities provides an avenue to ensure high levels of learning for all students, the further development of our educators into high performing teams, and the advancement of both our school and district administrators into more effective leaders.
REFERENCES


Toole, J., & Louis, K.S. (2002). The role of professional learning communities in international education. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *The second international handbook of educational leadership* (pp. 245-279). Kluwer


APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
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<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<td>A. How do principals define professional learning communities? What do they believe are the purpose and intended outcomes of this model?</td>
<td>1. How would you describe an “ideal” or “exemplar” professional learning community? What is most important about professional learning communities? What purpose does a professional learning community serve? How would you describe professional learning communities to those outside of your field? (A, B, D)</td>
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<td>B. How do principals believe professional learning communities are developed? What skills, knowledge, and practices are needed? What roles do they believe participants play?</td>
<td>1. How do you define educational leadership? What three words would you use to describe the role of the principal? What do schools or districts need in order to become a professional learning community? (A, B, C, D, E)</td>
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<td>C. What preparation, training, and resources do principals believe are needed in the development of professional learning communities?</td>
<td>1. You are mentoring a new principal who has been charged with implementing professional learning communities at the building level. How would you advise this person? What characteristics and beliefs should this person develop or possess? What resources does this person need? What actions should they take? Who should this person involve in the work, why, and how? (C, B, E)</td>
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| D. How do principals describe their past and current experiences developing professional learning communities? In what ways do they believe they embrace, resist, or lead development? | 1. Tell me about your experiences in education. What drives or influences your work? (D, A, C)  
2. Describe your experiences with professional learning communities. How do you learn about professional learning communities? Tell me about your greatest success with regards to professional learning communities. Tell me about your most significant mistake with regards to professional learning communities. (D, A, B, E)  
3. How do you think others would respond if asked how you promote, or |
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<th>support professional learning communities? How would they respond if asked how you resist and/or slow development of professional learning communities? How would you respond? (D, E, A, B)</th>
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<td>E.</td>
<td>How do principals measure the development of professional learning communities? What evidence do they identify? In what ways do they respond to their findings?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>How do you know if a professional learning community is successful? How do you respond? How do you know if a professional learning community is not successful? How do you respond? (E, A, B)</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Take a look at the “Professional Learning Communities at Work Continuum: Implementing a PLC Districtwide.” What is the first thing that comes to mind? How do you (or would you) use this document? If someone followed you for a day, what would they see that is aligned with this continuum? (E, A, B)</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>What are your professional goals? (E, B, C, D)</td>
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